WILLIAM HAZLITT

AND

HACKNEY COLLEGE

BY

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HACKNEY COLLEGE AND WILLIAM HAZLITT

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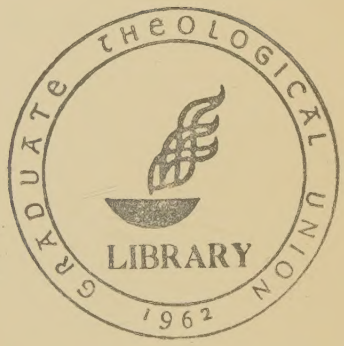

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WILLIAM HAZLITT

Born—April 10, 1778. *Died*—September, 18, 1830.

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Hackney College and William Hazlitt

"Hazlitt like Goldsmith, Charles Lamb, and Stevenson, lives very much in the memories of his youth; more intensely and continuously than any one of them."—W. P. Ker.

On April 10th, 1793, William Hazlitt reached the age of fifteen years, and it was in September of that year that he entered Hackney College as a "divinity" student. The college did not exist solely for the training of candidates for the ministry; of the forty-nine students in January, 1790, only nineteen were such. Of the latter, not more than eight could be on the college foundation; all others were required to pay sixty guineas per annum, a sum which presumably covered all charges for board, lodging, and tuition. We can hardly suppose it to be otherwise than that Hazlitt was one of the eight (if there were that number) who, in 1793, were admitted free of charge.

Hitherto it has been quite impossible to picture the place in which he found himself after six years of life spent, for the most part, in the little village of Wem. We may, however, have the advantage of a description of it, taken from a College report of the year 1787:

"The house is a large and noble building, and in the most substantial repair. The land belonging to it, and in which it stands, is computed to consist of about eighteen acres, enclosed within a brick wall. The walks, garden ground, offices and other conveniences, correspond in every respect to the house itself. The situation is in a healthful and gravelly soil, well-watered, and affording agreeable and extensive prospects."

Apparently, the comfort of the students received somewhat more attention than was the case in institutions of similar kind.

In the autumn of 1787, Charles Wellbeloved, having been refused permission to return to the Homerton Academy because he was

"tainted" with certain heresies, had transferred himself to Hackney College and, so it would seem, found the change by no means an unpleasant one.

"The contrast must have been in every respect in favour of his new situation. The College was a handsome and spacious building, surrounded with pleasure grounds, and affording ample accommodation for the students, who at Homerton had been lodged in mean and incommodious apartments, where, if they wished to study in cold weather, they had to keep up the vital warmth by putting their feet in a basket filled with hay." [1]

Funds had become much more scarce by the year 1793, and a strict eye was kept over the cost of boarding and lodging the students, but there is no reason for supposing that Hazlitt found any quarrel with the institution on the score of personal discomfort or the meanness of its board. Frugality and scantiness of resources must have been well known in the little parsonage at Wem.

It will help us to understand the situation in which Hazlitt found himself if we look somewhat into the scanty traditions of this college which had been founded but seven years earlier and, so far as is possible, note some of the things which will reveal to us the general tone of the place.

The founding of the college was the work of a group of Dissenters in London and the vicinity thereof, though the donations and subscriptions came from a very much wider geographical area. Those most nearly concerned in its administration may be characterized as being both political and theological dissenters.

There was Thomas Rogers, the father of Samuel Rogers the poet. He was the chairman of the committee of management from the first inception of the scheme. In politics he was an ardent Whig, and up to the time of his death (June 1793,) he maintained sympathy with the French Revolution, as did Price who had died two years earlier.

Richard Price who was, indeed, the very soul of respectability, had gained a world-wide reputation as the bold defender of the American Revolution, as a man worthy to be consulted in questions

[1] *Biographical Memoir of the Rev. Charles Wellbeloved.* By John Kenrick. 1860. London. pp. 10, 11.

relating to finance, and as the preacher of that Old Jewry sermon so remorselessly pilloried by Burke in the *Reflections on the French Revolution*. He had been a whole-hearted supporter of a thorough reform of the House of Commons when all talk of reform was liable to be charged as sedition, and it may well be, as Priestley intimated, that had Price been living at the time of the '91 riots, the college would not have been spared. In addition to being one of its earliest supporters, Dr. Price was, for a comparatively short time, one of the college lecturers. His lectures

"were given in Jebb's *Excerpta*, from Newton's *Principia*, and Dr. Thomas Simpson's *Treatise on Fluxions*. Dr. Price, however, gave but very few lectures at all while in his situation of Professor at Hackney College, both Tutor and pupils being better pleased to fill up the lecture hour in agreeable conversation on philosophy or on politics, rather than employ it in difficult and abstruse calculations." [1]

In Bentley's *Attic Miscellany* (1791), under the heading of "Political Portraiture," No. 3, was a caricature of Price. The print is entitled "Tale of a Tub," and bears the motto—Every man has his PRICE! From a tub—on which are emblazoned the words, POLITICAL GUNPOWDER—Price is holding forth; out of one of the pockets of his coat protrudes a bundle of papers on which are the words—REVOLUTION TOASTS. The MS. from which he is preaching is headed with the text, "Bind their kings with chains."

No. 4 in the same series represents Dr. Priestley (Doctor Phlogiston) with his foot on a Bible on which are written the words—"Explained away." From his pocket (left) there emerges a bundle of REVOLUTION TRACTS. With his right hand he holds aloft the MS. of a Political Sermon from which smoke and flame proceed; in his left hand he has an "Essay on Government" and there is smoke issuing from it also. This print is dated July 1st, 1791.

Joseph Priestley was, from the outset, a warm advocate of the interests of the college. At the beginning of the year 1791, he had published his reply to Burke's *Reflections*, and in April of the same

[1] Letter of T. Broadhurst who attended these classes. See *Christian Reformer*. Feb., 1848.

year he preached the annual sermon to the friends and supporters of the college. Four years earlier he had offended not only the Dissenters in general but many of his own particular friends by the outspokenness of his published address to Pitt, *On the subjects of Toleration and Church Establishments.* On the 14th July, 1791, the Birmingham riots began. The meeting-house of which Priestley was one of the ministers was burnt down; his own house was also burnt and he suffered the loss of the greater part of his library, many valuable manuscripts, and his philosophical apparatus.

Of the causes leading up to the riots an "inflammatory" handbill stands out conspicuously. All parties in Birmingham repudiated responsibility for it, and the magistrates offered £100 reward for the discovery of the writer, printer, publisher, or distributor of it, but without effect. "It appeared afterwards that it was fabricated in London, brought to Birmingham, and that a few copies were privately scattered under the table at an inn." The Lindsey letters recount many of the escapades of the Hackney College students, "most calamitous of all, the authorship of a handbill whose circulation in Birmingham led to the famous riots of July, 1791." [1]

On September 20th, 1791, an address of condolence and sympathy was presented to Priestley by "the Students, New College, Hackney." Its concluding paragraph was as follows:—

> "Though lawless violence may destroy your writings, may destroy yourself, it cannot extinguish that spirit of enquiry, it cannot eradicate those generous sentiments which you and the other enlighteners of Europe have excited. We trust that multitudes have, that multitudes will imbibe them. We trust that our love of truth and liberty flows not from the wild and irregular enthusiasm of youth, but in the effect of conviction and principle. Our bosoms glow with the idea of one day pursuing, with however unequal steps, the course which your have pointed out; of entering, even in the lowest capacity, that glorious phalanx, which, in contending for the rights, contends for the happiness of men." [2]

We may note a significant passage in Priestley's reply to these young enthusiasts.

[1] *Letters of Theophilus Lindsey*, by H. McLachlan. p. 41. 1920.
[2] Rutt's *Memoirs of Priestley*, ii., 157, 158.

"As good citizens, study the welfare of your country; but look beyond *that* to those great *principles* which will ensure the happiness of all Europe and of all mankind. Such principles as these now excite general attention; and your tutors will give you every assistance that you can want in the discussion of them. Shew, then, by your superior intelligence and activity, the superiority of your advantages over those of other institutions, which, instead of expanding the mind, by encouraging freedom of enquiry, effectually fetter its powers by a sworn attachment to a particular system, formed in an age of universal and acknowledged barbarism. Where the sons of those institutions are diffusing their *darkness*, do you bring your *light*; assured that the same grand luminary which has arisen on America, France, and Poland, and which has taught them all *universal toleration* in matters of religion, will illuminate the whole world; and that, in consequence of it, all mankind will be free, peaceable, and happy." [1]

There is evidence enough that the Hackney College students received encouragement to widen out their interests so as to include the political issues of the day; doubtless, Priestley's letter would help to sustain rather than to initiate an enthusiasm for those principles which were supposed to have in them abundant promise of happiness for the whole of mankind.

At this time there appeared in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* a letter of protest against certain words in disparagement of Priestley. It was William Hazlitt's first appearance in print. There is no need to quote it in full; the last paragraph will suffice.

"And here I shall conclude, staying only to remind your anti-Priestlian correspondents, that when they presume to attack the character of Dr. Priestley, they do not so much resemble the wren pecking at the eagle, as the owl, attempting by the flap of his wings, to hurl Mount Etna into the ocean; and that while Dr. Priestley's name 'shall flourish in immortal youth,' and his memory be respected and revered by posterity, prejudice no longer blinding the understandings of men, theirs will be forgotten in obscurity, or only remembered as the friends of bigotry and persecution, the most odious of all characters."

Probably it would not be far wrong to assume that Hazlitt was encouraged and helped in this composition by his father. The boy was but thirteen years of age.

Some time during the year 1792, Priestley became one of the tutors in the Hackney College. Hazlitt, who, as we have noted,

[1] *Ibid.*, 158, 159.

entered the college in September, 1793, attended his lectures which were continued up to the beginning of April, or thereabouts, of the following year. In November, 1791, Priestley had been called to be minister of Dr. Price's congregation at Hackney, and the conjecture that Hazlitt was frequently one of his hearers is likely to be correct for in the college minutes, under date March 9th, 1791, there is note of " a suitable compensation to be made to Gravel Pit for seats occupied by students."

Theophilus Lindsey, the Unitarian minister of the Essex Street Chapel, watched the progress of the college as anxiously as any other, was a liberal contributor to its funds, one of the committee of management, and one whose counsel and advice was always eagerly sought. In politics Lindsey was consistently on the side of the Whig reformers; he followed with sympathetic interest the course of the French Revolution and was a keen critic of the Pitt administration.

" He sympathized deeply with those political characters who, whatever indiscretions some of them might be chargeable with, suffered from that which in his estimation, was the over-strained rigour of the law both in Scotland and England, penalties far beyond the demerit of any crime which could be proved against them."

To the practical nature of this sympathy further reference will be made.

In February, 1790, there had been published a wood engraving entitled—*Repeal of the Test Act. A vision.* It represents the interior of a dissenting meeting-house. Priestley, Price, and Lindsey are crowded into the pulpit. Amongst the congregation are Charles James Fox, Abraham Rees, and Andrew Kippis. Included in the descriptive text are the words:—

From such implacable Tormentors,
Fanatics, Hypocrites, Dissenters,

. . . . . .

May God preserve the Church and Throne.

A coloured print of the same period, but carrying no date, represents Fox and Priestley closely embraced. Another bearing

the date—March 22nd, 1790, shows Priestley preaching from a tub labelled FANATICISM. There is a hole in the back of the tub through which the devil is thrusting his fork or trident. Amongst the hearers are Fox, the Duke of Norfolk, and Sheridan. Fox asks "Is there such a thing as a Devil?" Priestley is answering "No!" and the devil is saying "If you had eyes behind, you'd know better my dear Doctor."

There are other caricatures of Priestley but those of which we have made mention indicate sufficiently clearly the conception of him which was current in the minds of the people generally.

For some years, from 1786 to 1792, Andrew Kippis was the college lecturer in History and Belles Lettres. He was the minister of the Prince's Street Chapel, Westminster, a Fellow of the Royal Society, and of some considerable eminence in the world of letters. As the consistent advocate of civil and religious liberty he was level-headed and discreet, and, having gained little of the notoriety which attached to Priestley, his associations with the college would, even for a great number of its detractors, increase rather than diminish its respectability. The same may be said of Dr. Rees.

Abraham Rees, the minister of the Old Jewry congregation, for thirty-three years engaged in the education of students for the ministry, was a tutor of the Hackney College from its foundation to its demise. For some time (approximately 1787-1789) he held the post of resident tutor.

Not only Kippis and Rees but, doubtless, all those who were interested in the future of the college, were dismayed as they watched the trend of events and recognized that the freedom of thought of which they were so consistent advocates was not without its dangers during a period which was peculiarly one of unreserved and extravagant speculation. *They* might be able to retain some semblance of sobriety of judgment but was it to be wondered at if the enthusiasm of youth carried many of the students into perplexing extremes of thought and embarrassing indiscretions.

We are not left without indications of the troubled atmosphere which, for some time at any rate, prevailed within the four walls of the college. Charles Wellbeloved's biographer has put on

record one episode to which reference will have to be made; meanwhile, we may note what he has to say about the conditions during the earlier years of this short-lived institution.

"Mr. Wellbeloved's residence at the College at Hackney coincided with the era of the first enthusiasm with which the friends of liberty hailed the commencement of the French Revolution. At the time it was viewed with dislike and apprehension by hardly any, except those who had no sympathy with the victims of oppression, or who had a direct interest in the maintenance of domestic abuses, the fate of which seemed prefigured in their downfall in France. It may easily be supposed that the students were amongst the most ardent admirers of Gallic liberty, and in the exultation to which this feeling gave rise, it was a difficult task for those, to whom the discipline of the College was entrusted, to maintain authority and procure obedience, even to the most reasonable restrictions. It is amusing to read in the academical correspondence of the day the protestations against the ordinances of the Committee, and the resolutions to resist their tyranny, couched in terms as energetic as if all liberty, civil and religious, were endangered by them. *Ça ira* and the *Marseillaise* were favourite ditties at the College symposia, and kings, priests, and aristocrats, without much distinction of foreign or domestic, were the objects of hearty execration." [1]

John Kentish, who removed to Hackney from the academy at Daventry, was a student in the college from the autumn of 1788 till June of 1791.

"He availed himself of the opportunity which the metropolis affords, of hearing those who were most eminent as preachers or parliamentary and forensic speakers, and no doubt benefited in many ways by the change from the limited sphere of a small country town. But his high sense of duty was offended by the contempt of authority which some of the students exhibited."[2]

In the autumn of 1789, Thomas Belsham who, after having been at the head of the Daventry academy for eight years, had become Unitarian in his theology and had resigned his post, became the resident tutor at Hackney. It is generally claimed that his advent did much to restore confidence and to bring about improved conduct on the part of the students. The improvement might have been greater still had he been invested with powers similar to those which he had exercized at Daventry; as it was, all questions of

[1] *Memoir of Charles Wellbeloved*, by John Kenrick, pp. 21, 22.
[2] *Memoir of John Kentish. Christian Reformer*, May, 1853.

discipline had to go before the committee of management. He fretted against the limitations to his powers but in his correspondence he affirms that " the young people behave on the whole very well," [1] and that they " acquiesce in the regulations and restraints which are thought necessary without any reluctance or murmuring."[2] A little later he writes:—" I think I may honestly say that we have not one irregular member; and it gives me great satisfaction to see that my labours to promote order and discipline have been attended with such good effect."[3]

Belsham's comments on the following episode, were they available, would be interesting; it was subsequent to the writing of the letters from which we have just quoted. As Wellbeloved did not leave the college till the autumn of 1791, we may presume it to have taken place after that date, and not later than June, 1792, when the college session ended, for Thomas Paine, barely escaping arrest, had left London for Paris by September 13th of the same year. The story is told by one of Wellbeloved's friends who was still at the college. The letter, addressed to Wellbeloved, is, unfortunately, given no date in Kenrick's memoir.

" Last Sunday but one, —— and some others observed that it (would) be a good opportunity to have a republican supper, and invite Paine. I left a note for him accordingly, and when I called in the evening, Johnson told me that Paine was much pleased with the invitation and would wait on us. We asked George Morgan to meet him, and had the most glorious republican party that the walls of the College ever contained. We sat down to supper, eighteen or nineteen, and were very agreeably disappointed to find Paine as agreeable and striking in conversation as he is in his writings. No man, I should think, abounds so much with anecdotes of Washington, Fayette, Burke, &c., or has so striking a mode of expression, as this apostle of liberty. His very countenance points him out for a great man: for though very weather-beaten and worse for wear, there is a peculiar enthusiastic fire in his eyes, especially when he is pleased with any sentiment in favour of liberty, which is really wonderful. He breakfasted with us, and before he went, expressed great satisfaction at our spirit, and promised to call on us whenever he came to Hackney. Among other things he told us that he had seen a

[1] *Memoir of Rev. T. Belsham.* J. Williams. Jan. 21, 1790. p. 430.
[2] *Ibid.* Oct. 8, 1790. p. 434.
[3] *Ibid.* Feb. 21, 1791. p. 447.

letter to Horne Tooke, for the Revolution Society, from a club at Sheffield of 1500 republicans, chiefly manufacturers. Their method is peculiarly excellent, and upon the true plan of a national convention. They divide into fifteen clubs, of 100 each, to discuss popular topics, and then elect a certain number of members from each club, for the purpose of transacting business and comparing their thoughts. This is, indeed, the bud of a revolution."[1]

We may be allowed to doubt whether the spirit of the students, so satisfactory to Paine, was altogether to the liking of Belsham and his colleagues. Apparently it was not the only "republican party" arranged within the college precincts. It is possible to admire the honest enthusiasm of Paine and to think well of the ardour of the students, to be glad that they had brains enough to be foolish, and to avow that they were moved, as indeed they probably were, by a high idealism, but we cannot suppose that the greater part of the sober and steady people whose patronage the college sorely needed would think well of an institution where the students, or some considerable number of them, discovered a greater zeal for politics than religion or refused to distinguish between the two.

The Unitarian dissenters as a body were held up to contempt and hatred by the issue (July 14th, 1792) of a print purporting to represent the Unitarian coat of arms. It is addressed to "those Peaceable Subjects of this Kingdom who prefer the Present happy constitution to that Anarchy & Bloodshed so jealously sought for by these restless advocates for Priestley & Paine's Sophistical Tenets." On the arms (sable) there is displayed a harpy suckling her brood and holding a banner charged with drops of blood; a crown figures on the centre of the banner but on the staff thereof hangs the cap of liberty. Around the border of the coat of arms are several nests of serpents; an equilateral triangle representing the Trinity is set above the arms and is shown beset by fiends who yet cannot approach it for the celestial glory which surrounds it. The descriptive notes conclude with the remark—"It is under the Cloak of Religion the greatest enormities are committed."

[1] *Memoir of the Rev. Charles Wellbeloved*, by John Kenrick, M.A., F.S.A. London, 1860, pp. 22, 23.

On a print published June 12th, 1793, there is a representation of Priestley who is referred to as "old Phlogistick the Hackney Schoolmaster." We may note, also, a print of November 15th of the preceding year. It is entitled—"Sedition, Levelling, and Plundering." Priestley and Paine are seated at table; between them (in the background) is the Devil. This representation is the off-set to seven stanzas of crude verse of which the first line is—God save great George our King. The second stanza reads thus:

Old Mother Church disdains,
Th'vile Unitarian strains
That round her ring;
She keeps her dignity,
And scorning faction's lie,
Sings with sincerity,
God save the King.

This requires the following footnote:—"It is but justice to observe, the Unitarian Dissenters are the Sect so restless and turbulent; the Independents and Anabaptists stand aloof from all Society with them, and are perfectly satisfied with the PRESENT FORM OF GOVERNMENT."

The remaining stanzas are as follows:—

Sedition is their creed,
Feigned sheep, but wolves indeed,
How can we trust ?
Tom Paine and *Priestley* would
Deluge the throne with blood;
And lay the great and good,
Low in the dust.

Tom Paine and *Priestley* are
More base and desperate far,
Than vile Jack Cade,
He for reform did cry;
They for equality
Would stain true liberty,
With British Blood.

Priestley, the *Truth* go preach
Thy flock no Errors teach,
Leave such base ways;
God's word cease to pervert,
To peace thy flock exhort,
Nor liberty distort,
Mend thy last days.

Paine ! Paine ! thy motley life,
Compound of fraud and strife,
Plainly declares,
Thy aim is levelling,
Nobles, State, Church, and King,
Like a rogue then you'll sing
PLUNDER ! ! ! who cares.

The whole thing is cheap enough and sordid too. Moreover, fidelity to fact was no necessary characteristic of the squibs and caricatures of the last decade of the eighteenth century. They represented the passions and prejudices of those who originated them; so blatant were their exaggerations, so crude the thought which they expressed, so unscrupulous their portrayal of a victim, that we may well pass them by as utterly useless in helping us to understand aright the thing vilified or the poor unfortunate so irresponsibly and so preposterously misrepresented. This notwithstanding, they are fairly safe guides to the existence, in certain quarters, of an intensity of feeling which frequently did not stop short of a loathing and a hatred of the person caricatured. Its graphic representation in a cheap print was one of the surest ways of creating and fostering in others that same intensity of feeling, and especially in the unthinking multitudes. Often, those who could accurately gauge the precise worth of any print issued were not entirely uninfluenced thereby; their better judgment would turn out to be somewhat recreant to the task of wholly nullifying the insidious suggestiveness of what was so vividly portrayed. Those who were not thoughtless and not easily misled but merely uninformed, whilst somewhat irresponsive to obvious misrepresentation, could not readily forget that which they had seen.

The supporters of any party, of any institution, of any school of

thought, were not made any easier in their minds when those who, in the public eye, stood as their representatives were made objects of gross caricature. If, already, there was something short of a complete faith whether in the representative or in the party or institution itself, then the element of distrust was enlarged and threatened with complete destruction what was already a wavering allegiance. For these reasons we may be satisfied that the prints which held up to execration men like Priestley and his associates, and the Unitarianism of which they were the most notable exponents, were not without their influence upon those who might have become supporters of the Hackney College nor upon those whose allegiance was already gained but who were disquieted by Priestley's close association with that institution and the growing emphasis on a distinctively Unitarian theology. Furthermore, as we are soon to see, contributors to the *Gentleman's Magazine* were, not occasionally, engaged in diatribes against the College and the way in which it was conducted.

We must first note that ere Belsham's first session at the College was complete, Gilbert Wakefield had been appointed tutor in classics. His election to the post had not taken place without misgivings and opposition. Undoubtedly he ranked high as a classical scholar and from 1779 to 1783, he had been a tutor in the Warrington Academy, but "from an unconquerable aversion to the modes of prayer among the Dissenters," he was wont to attend the services of the Church of England or, perhaps even more frequently, to go nowhere at all. And, there were those who believed him to be a man of a difficult temper, nor was this belief without foundation in fact. He had not long taken up his duties before he was, rightly or wrongly, completely dissatisfied with the whole arrangement of the college curriculum and regarded the manner of educating the students as "so prodigiously absurd as to exceed all adequate representation of it in adequate language." He decided to correct the improprieties or resign. In a letter to the committee he discharged a full broadside of the most pointed criticism. For a brief time matters were accommodated but, according to Wakefield, one or other of his letters to the committee was censured as

rude and *indecent*. And, beyond all doubt, there was, in the tartness of his manner, something wholly reprehensible. Finally, he was, according to his own account, left with "no alternative but escape from a crazy and sinking vessel." His connexion with the college ceased in June, 1791.

By the autumn of the same year he had published his *Tract on Social and Public Worship*. It was to this tract that Lindsey referred in a letter to William Tayleur in March, 1792.

"You will have heard I presume, that Mr. Wakefield's tract on prayer has rather made some disturbance among the students with respect to their attendance at the public devotions of the House, but I trust this will pass away, as several of them have withdrawn."[1]

Wakefield was now busy compiling the memoirs of his own life; these memoirs were published in the early part of 1792. They contained a full account of his connexion with the Hackney College; it was an *ex parte* statement and, which was worse, was accompanied by a lengthy and unsparing criticism of the whole scheme of education, and of the general policy of those responsible for the management of the institution and its funds. He addressed them in plain words:—

"Before all your resources are exhausted, and the patronage of the public is gradually withdrawn for ever; (because such a spirit of exertion, when once quenched, will not easily be lighted up again) you must SELL YOUR BUILDINGS, transfer your *college* to a more favourable situation, and refound it under better auspices. The dilemma is unpalatable enough, but admits of no hesitation. You have no choice between *this* and RUIN.[2]

The publication of these memoirs was calculated to give to Hackney College an unenviable notoriety and to make it yet more difficult to get in the yearly subscriptions which were so necessary for keeping the institution going. Beyond a doubt many of the things said by Wakefield were grossly unfair and the whole of his diatribe against the College and those connected therewith cannot be taken as other than an *ex parte* statement—the off-scourings of the writer's spleen, the too facile use of "a pen dipped in gall."

[1] *Letters of Theophilus Lindsey*. p. 137.
[2] *Memoirs of Gilbert Wakefield*, ed. 1792, p. 373.

Of these *Memoirs* the *Gentleman's Magazine* [1] gave a three page review, and spoke of them as "including just censures of the system of education among the Dissenters, the ill-conduct of the college at the first outset, encumbering it with buildings, and neglecting to provide for the tutors." For the rest, it was "a narrative of those petty disputes between man and man, which, if in all cases laid before the public, would be the greatest bore the press could be condemned to."

But this was not the first time that there had been mention of Hackney College in the pages of the *Gentleman's Magazine*; two years earlier [2] there had been admitted to its columns a letter alleging that one of the College reports concealed a material part of its income. The trustees, undoubtedly men of the highest probity and honour whatever their business capacity may have been, did not see fit to make any reply; their silence was as unfortunate as it is inexplicable. There followed,[3] as was natural enough, comment on the lack of response to the challenge, and occasion was made for intimating that reports unfavourable to "the boasted *discipline*" of the college were in circulation. These comments were included in a review of a sermon to the supporters of the College by Joseph Priestley. The reviewer was by no means pleased with the sermon and asks:—"Why, in the name of all that is sacred, will not the advocates of liberty transport themselves where they may have their fill of liberty, instead of boring their countrymen whose ideas are not up to it." Readers of the *Magazine* can hardly have become prepossessed in favour of an institution referred to in such terms, and in this respect things went from bad to worse.

We cannot take note of all the occasions on which, during the next few years, mention was made of the affairs of the College; it suffices to say that not one of the writers was other than harshly critical. The College was, in one instance,[4] referred to as "Nova Cracovia"; to thus label it was evidence of a desire to discredit

[1] Vol. lxiii., pp. 737-740. [2] Vol. lx., p. 793. [3] Vol. lxi., pp. 462-466.

[4] Vol. lxii., p. 496. The writer apparently mixed up Cracow with Racow the seat of the College of the Polish Anti-trinitarians whence the *Racovian Catechism* was issued.

its teaching by insisting that that teaching was Socinian, otherwise (as was meant) Unitarian. Doubtless, there was, also, a scarcely veiled prophecy of what would be the ultimate fate of the institution itself. Faustus Socinus spent the greater part of the last twenty-five years of his life at Racow; his Polish adherents not only saw the breaking up of their college but were, eventually, given the option of conformity or exile.

In view of the fact that when Hazlitt went to Hackney College, Priestley was already giving lectures there, we may note that in June, 1792, William Priestley, his second son, having appeared before the bar of the National Assembly of France, was given "letters of naturalization." He declared that his father had said to him:—"Go, go and live among this brave and hospitable people; learn from them to detest tyranny, and to love liberty." The President of the Assembly vowed that it would not be without pride that France would adopt the son of Dr. Priestley. The transaction of this business was duly recorded in the *Gentleman's Magazine* [1] and, apparently, in the newspapers as well.[2] In a letter to a friend, Priestley justified his attitude to the matter by alleging the unlikelihood of any child of his finding a desirable situation in this country. The expectation of such a result of the wide-spread prejudice against himself was inevitable. It was just as inevitable that his interest in Hackney College should hasten rather than retard its downfall. When he became one of the lecturers it was to the manifest perturbation of not a few of its supporters; presumably there would be no question of his personal fitness or of his qualifications but the institution could ill afford to alienate the sympathy of any of those who were already subscribers or of those who might rally to its support. But funds were low and Priestley gave his lectures as a labour of love, receiving no remuneration whatever.

The issue of the *Magazine* for May, 1793,[3] contained a letter which gave publicity to a report that, at mid-summer, the College was to be closed down and sold, and concluded with the satirical

[1] Vol. lxii., p. 657. [2] *Life & Correspondence of Priestley*, vol. II., p. 185.
[3] Vol. lxiii., p. 334.

comment:—"Let the friends of Christianity and the British Constitution *mourn*."

Thus far, as we may legitimately suppose, the continued references to the College emanated from those who had no sympathy with the so-called "rational dissenters" and firmly believed that the College itself stood for the extreme left of both theological and political radicalism. But there now appeared, in this same issue of the *Magazine*,[1] an expression of regret at its impending downfall; its writer was Edward Harwood, a friend of Priestley, and one of the pioneers of Textual Criticism. Harwood was, at this time, an aged, bed-ridden, and disgruntled man, but that would not minimize the effect of the blunt criticism which was coupled with the regret. His view of the situation may be summed up in the sentence:—"With regard to the speedy dissolution of the New College, at Hackney, the old adage has proved too true, *Quos Deus &c.*, those whom God is willing to ruin, he first blinds their understanding."

In close proximity [2] to this letter of Harwood's was one signed by "A Constant Reader"; its purport is sufficiently indicated in its first paragraph:—

"What was predicted, and what the managers of the undertaking dare not contradict, is now come to pass. The boasted seminary of rational religion, the *slaughter house of Christianity*, as it has been not inaptly called, is become *felo de se*, and with all its *substructiones insanae*, its overgrown buildings, is offered to sale for less than £10,000."

The trustees and committee of the College maintained their silence, unless, indeed, it was at their suggestion that there appeared in the next issue of the *Magazine* [3] a letter signed "A Subscriber to the College at Hackney." It was a foolish letter, one not calculated to conciliate anyone nor to lessen the severity of further hostile criticism. The representations of the "Constant Reader" are stigmatized as "one continued tissue of falsehood and misrepresentation" and expression is given to a desire for

"this gentleman, and others, who so frequently favour us with their unsolicited opinion and advice concerning our affairs, to understand that the silence of the managers does not proceed from any incapacity to contradict

[1] Vol. lxiii., p. 409. [2] *Ibid.*, p. 412. [3] *Ibid.*, p. 491

or disprove the foolish fictions of the day, but from a sovereign contempt of the illiberal abuse with which that useful institution has been loaded, from a clear conviction of the falsehood of the infamous calumnies which have been so industriously circulated against it, and from a fixed determination to manage their own affairs in their own way, without giving an account of their proceedings to every self-important and self-instituted inquirer, who may arrogantly summon them to his bar."

It is then stated that the College will continue in its present situation and " is still likely to remain, as Mr. Burke styles it, ' an arsenal,' for the fabrication of weapons which may justly strike terror into the minds of those who, like him, are alarmed at the accelerated progress of human improvement, and of the rising spirit of Reason and Liberty."

We need not take any further note of the reply [1] of the " Constant Reader " than to make mention of his intimation that the friends and supporters of the institution had, after a late serious discussion, unanimously agreed to " bolster it up *for one year longer.*" Probably this was quite correct so long as we do not interpret it as indicating that the College would inevitably close down at the end of another twelve months. Presumably the managers saw their way to keeping going for another year, and *hoped* that it would be for many years.

Nevertheless, the conclusion is inevitable that when Hazlitt became one of the College students in September of this year, 1793, no one could tell how soon it would be that he would have to look elsewhere for the completion of his academic course. However, as we shall see, he gave up all idea of entering the ministry, several months before the College came to an untimely end.

We can now understand that in going to Hackney College, Hazlitt was hardly entering into that restricted field of interests commonly associated with the theological seminary of these days. It was with a complete lack of understanding, and of knowledge, of the situation that William Carew Hazlitt, prepossessed by thoughts of the young Hazlitt's genius, was able to say:—

[1] Vol. lxiii., p. 618.

"To such a mind the potent contrast between the narrow teaching of the college and the broad tenets held by the set to which Hazlitt the painter had attached himself—Holcroft, Godwin, Fawcett, Stoddard, and others—was sufficient as a source of profitable reflection.

. . . the artist brother was, after a certain age, the tutelary genius whenever he (William) stayed in London, and the directing and controlling agency; and it is in the circle which John Hazlitt had drawn round him in Rathbone Place that we have to seek the origin of the secession from the Unitarian ministry and of the espousal, first of art, and eventually of letters as a means of livelihood."[1]

It is not possible to discover any shred of evidence that John Hazlitt became in any way a controlling and directing agency over his brother's mind. Even at the age of fifteen there was in the younger brother little response to the persuasiveness of others; he felt quite capable of making his own decisions and we may take it for granted that there was no need for him to go to Rathbone Place in order to get breadth to his thought or to set his mind free from being too closely absorbed within a narrow range of interests.

There is in one of Hazlitt's essays what is almost certainly an allusion to the time when he entered on his course at Hackney College. As he writes he hears the *Letter-Bell.*

"It has a lively, pleasant sound with it, and not only fills the street with its importunate clamour, but rings clear through the length of many half-forgotten years. It strikes upon the ear, it vibrates to the brain, it wakes me from the dream of time, it flings me back upon my first entrance into life, the period of my first coming up to Town, when all around was strange, uncertain, adverse—a hubbub of confused noises, a chaos of shifting objects—and when this sound alone, startling me with the recollection of a letter I had to send to the friends I had lately left, brought me as it were to myself, made me feel that I had links still connecting me with the universe, and gave me hope and patience to persevere. At that loud tinkling, interrupted sound, the long line of blue hills near the place where I was brought up waves in the horizon, a golden sunset hovers over them, the dwarf-oaks rustle their red leaves in the evening breeze, and the road from Wem to Shrewsbury, by which I first set out on my journey through life, stares me in the face as plain but, from time and change, not less visionary and mysterious than the pictures in the *Pilgrim's Progress.*"[2]

[1] *Four Generations of a Literary Family*, by Wm. Carew Hazlitt. 1897. Vol. I., pp. 71-72.

[2] *Coll. Works*, vol. XII., pp. 235, 236.

As we have already noted, the surroundings at Hackney College appear to have been pleasant enough and we do well to remember that in the last decade of the eighteenth century Hackney itself was something of a rural retreat situated some four or five miles from the heart of the metropolis.

The young student would be eager to know something of those with whom he was now to live in daily contact—both tutors and students. Of two of the tutors mention has already been made but something more can be done by way of indicating the kind of personalities with which he was to be most closely associated.

At the head of the institution was Thomas Belsham. His personality was such as to lend itself to caricature and it is almost matter for wonder that he is nowhere limned in the pages of Hazlitt's essays. He was at this time in his forty-sixth year; the only existing portrait belongs to some fourteen years later, and it may be that if we would picture him in his vigorous prime we must first mask the double chin and vastly swollen neck. Probably, a great seriousness of purpose and a considerable power of application were Belsham's most conspicuous endowments—a man for whom one might feel a very real respect and be very willing to let it remain at that. He was never married, and one of his sisters was responsible for the management of the boarding and lodging of the students.

Belsham lived for some thirty-three years after the closing of Hackney College and during that time was an unwearied exponent of what he, and others, called "rational Christianity." During these later years he seems to have been possessed of an indomitable faith such as can hardly be said to have been his during the Hackney College period—1789 to 1796. In 1789 he had only just adopted the Unitarian theology and his zeal for its tenets knew no bounds. He asked nothing better than to be the upholder, and if necessary, the strenuous defender of the theology of Lindsey and Priestley. The collating of texts of Scripture was a task in which he excelled, an occupation in which he could forget all else. He was, indeed, more skilled in dealing with the ramparts of faith than in establishing the foundations thereof.

But let us trace something of his private thoughts during the years that he had under his charge one of the most famous of the college students. Hazlitt entered the college in September, 1793. In his diary, under date January 5th, 1794, Belsham writes:—

"Though our numbers are low, yet there seems to be some reason to hope for a revival of the institution . . . Public affairs are very dark, and for the first time in my life I entertain very serious and gloomy apprehensions upon political subjects. I endeavour to divert my mind, by keeping myself fully employed. Here again is a source of uneasiness, that I do not, or cannot, fulfil the task I set myself."[1]

Little wonder if the students felt a like difficulty. Less than four months later, April 27th, the diary reads thus:—

"Public affairs are in a most alarming state, and the violence of our administration bodes ill for the peace of the community and the friends of liberty. In this dark prospect I am sometimes ready to enquire, Where is the Regent of the Universe? What good can arise out of these terrible evils, and why could it not have been produced without them? But I bow in deep submission to the will of Heaven. I feel the attachment to life lessen, and think with satisfaction, that a few more fleeting years will terminate my course."[2]

It does not appear that out of such a state of mind there could come much that would carry conviction to those who listened to his lectures.

A few of the letters written by Hazlitt to his father, during the course of his time at Hackney College, still survive; with the possible exception of one of them they all belong to the first three or four months of that period. From these it is evident that, at first, the major portion of his studies was done under the guidance of a tutor named Corrie who is frequently mentioned and appears to have shown something of an understanding sympathy in his dealings with a promising but somewhat wayward pupil. Who was Corrie? He must have counted for a great deal during Hazlitt's two years at Hackney, but hitherto no attempt has been made by Hazlitt's biographers to make clear his identity or to give any information whatever about him.

[1] *Memoirs of Thomas Belsham*, by J. Williams. 1833. pp. 454-455.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 455.

John Corrie was the son of the Rev. Josiah Corrie of Kenilworth, at which place he was born in the year 1769; he was thus but a young man of twenty-four years of age when Hazlitt first came under his charge. He received his education in part at the Daventry Academy under Belsham and in part at the Hackney College. Having completed his studies at the latter place in 1790, he remained to fulfil whatever duties might be required of him. A year later he was to remain "upon condition of his paying 50 guineas a year for board and lodging." At some time prior to Hazlitt's arrival he was appointed assistant classical tutor and held that post until Hazlitt left in 1795. He then settled as a minister in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, for a brief period; thence he removed to the vicinity of Birmingham where he kept a school of some celebrity.

"Mr. Corrie's bias, originally, was to polite learning. Even in his youth he had a quick perception of beauty in writing and the arts: his early compositions, both in poetry and prose, showed a delicacy of thought and feeling beyond what his years denoted; and whatever he did seemed to be done with little effort. He soon read the productions of the standard writers of Greece and Rome with the delight which they are fitted to impart. When he entered on the world, circumstances led him to a more extended course of study; and the duties which devolved on him, and his intercourse with eminent philosophers and scholars, gave a new impulse to his pursuits. Mathematics, pure and mixed, geography, history and political economy, now engaged his attention." [1]

We are tempted to hazard the guess, remembering that it is but a guess, that Hazlitt, in after years, cherished not unkindly feelings for Corrie; in the *Project for a New Theory of Civil and Criminal Legislation* (1828) we find these words:—

"Mr. Corrie, my old tutor at Hackney, may still have the rough draft of this speculation, which I gave him with tears in my eyes, and which he good-naturedly accepted in lieu of the customary *themes*, and as proof that I was no idler, but that my inability to produce a line on the ordinary school topics arose from my being involved in more difficult and abstruse matters." [2]

Corrie died in the year 1839, but whether the finished essay of his former pupil ever came under his notice we cannot tell.

[1] *Report of the Committee of the Birmingham Philosophical Institution.* Oct., 1839.

[2] Collected Works, vol. XII., p. 405.

On the whole we are inclined to suppose that Hazlitt could hardly have had a tutor more willing to give encouragement and help. The notice from which we have already quoted speaks of Corrie's readiness to encourage rising talent and of his ability in "communicating with superior perspicuity, skill and ease, the result of his own inquiries and attainments." From the year 1812 till the time of his death, a period of twenty-seven years, he was the President of the Birmingham Philosophical Society; he was a Vice-President of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, and in the year 1820, was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. That Corrie retained considerable sympathy with the Unitarians is evident for he acted as the colleague of the Rev. Robert Kell in the ministry of the Old Meeting, Birmingham, from July 1817 to May, 1819, when, on account of ill-health, he resigned "to the unspeakable regret of a numerous and intelligent society." He died on October 16th, 1839.

Concerning him Hazlitt wrote to his father:—"I like Dominie (that is the name which Dr. Rees gave him) and his lectures very much." [1]

In another of his letters home, he says:—"I attend Dr. Rees on mathematics and algebra." [2] The Rev. Abraham Rees had been connected with the Hackney College from the time of its first inception and held the position of resident tutor until the appointment of Belsham in 1789. Thenceforth, he continued to live in a house continguous to the main buildings and was, apparently, still responsible for a small amount of lecturing to the students. The probability is that Hazlitt's contacts with him were slight, but such as they were they may quite well have been profitable enough. The great monument to the industry of Rees was the one time famous "New Cyclopaedia" in forty-five quarto volumes (1803-1820); he did not embark on this enterprise until he was nearing sixty years of age.

Rees had been teaching students for the ministry and others for more than thirty years when Hazlitt went to him for instruction in mathematics, and might well have been both dry and turgid in

[1] *Lamb and Hazlitt*, p. 37. [2] *Ibid*, p. 43.

all that he said and did. He has been described as a man of sound and strong sense, possessed of well-digested thoughts, a sober thinker and logical reasoner; one of his eulogists affirms that "in the more solid and useful properties of the understanding, none have surpassed and few have equalled him." Nevertheless, the wide range of his knowledge appears to have sat lightly upon him and to have left undiminished his love of genial intercourse with his fellow human beings. His cheerful and cordial hospitality was, apparently, a thing not to be forgotten; "no man was ever more alive to the domestic affections; as a companion he was unrivalled; he had urbanity of manners and almost unrivalled powers of conversation; he lived on terms of cordial intimacy with religious professors of various communions; and could number among his most valued friends Churchmen of high rank and distinguished eminence."

Allowing that there may be even more than a touch of exaggeration in these impressions derived from memorial addresses, it is still evident that Hazlitt is hardly likely to have felt the inadequacy of such tuition as he had from Abraham Rees.

There is one other from whom, for a short time, Hazlitt received instruction—Dr. Priestley. We can hardly avoid having faith in the boyish eagerness with which he would attend the first, and perhaps all, of the lectures which he heard from one for whom his father had high regard, one whose writings he had himself eagerly read when he was but a boy of twelve years of age, one whom he had eagerly defended in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* [1] when, after the Birmingham riots, his (Priestley's) name had been loaded with abuse.

Probably, this earlier enthusiasm for Priestley had suffered no diminution when Hazlitt was listening to the lectures on *History and General Policy*, lectures which Priestley had written when he was a tutor in the Warrington Academy and which, as we have already seen, he gave gratuitously to the Hackney students.

It is perfectly true that, at a later date, as William Carew Hazlitt took pains to declare, Hazlitt somewhat modified his youthful admiration of Priestley. That, surely, was inevitable. Howbeit,

[1] *Supra.* p. 5.

in his fifty-first year, but a short time before his death, he contributed to *The Atlas* an essay *On the late Dr. Priestley*,[1] an essay containing what are beyond doubt reminiscences of the Hackney days and, also, words of high tribute to the genius of his erstwhile tutor.

As we shall see, Priestley emigrated to the United States some eight months after Hazlitt's arrival at the college and never returned to England. The following description must, therefore, be drawn from recollections of such intimacy as those eight months provided.

"His personal appearance was altogether singular and characteristic. It belonged to the class which we may call *scholastic*. His feet seem to have been entangled in a gown, his features to have been set in a wig or taken out of a mould. There was nothing to induce you to say with the poet, that 'his body thought'; it was merely the envelope of his mind. In his face there was a strange mixture of acuteness and obtuseness; the nose was sharp and turned up, yet rounded at the end, a keen glance, a quivering lip, yet the aspect placid and indifferent, without any of that expression which arises either from the close workings of the passions or an intercourse with the world. You discovered the prim, formal look of the Dissenter—none of the haughtiness of the churchman nor the wildness of the visionary. He was, in fact, always the student in his closet, moved in or out, as it happened, with no perceptible variation; he sat at his breakfast with a folio volume before him on one side and a notebook on the other; and if a question were asked him, answered it like an absent man. He stammered, spoke thick, and huddled his words ungracefully together. To him the whole business of life consisted in *reading and writing*; and the ordinary concerns of this life were considered as a frivolous or mechanical interruption to the more important interests of science and of a future state."

Taken in its entirety and allowing for more or less of error in one or two details, that is as good a picture of Priestley as may anywhere be found within the confines of less than a dozen sentences. And in order to write it Hazlitt had to cast his mind back over an intervening period of thirty-five years. One of his tutors had made an indelible impression upon him.

In this same essay he tells us that Dr. Priestley might have passed in external appearance for a French priest, or the lay brother of a convent; his frame was light and fragile, neither strong nor elegant;

[1] *Coll. Works*, vol. XII., pp. 357ff.

in going to any place " he walked on before his wife (who was a tall, powerful woman) with a primitive simplicity, or as if a certain restlessness and hurry impelled him on with a projectile force before others."

Most of all we are interested to know how such powers of mind as were Priestley's will come through the ordeal of Hazlitt's maturest judgment, knowing that this later estimate though more discriminating will hardly contain an excess of admiration beyond that which he felt as a student for the Ministry.

Having described Priestley as being in literature the Voltaire of the Unitarians, he goes on to say:—

" He (Priestley) did not, like Mr. Southey, to be sure (who has been denominated the English Voltaire) vary from prose to poetry, or from one side of a question to another; but he took in a vast range of subjects of very opposite characters, treated them all with the same acuteness, spirit, facility, and perspicuity, and notwithstanding the intricacy and novelty of many of his speculations, it may be safely asserted that there is not an obscure sentence in all that he wrote. *Those who run may read.* He wrote on history, grammar, law, politics, divinity, metaphysics, and natural philosophy—and those who perused his works fancied themselves entirely, and were in a great measure, masters of all these subjects. He was one of the very few who could make abstruse questions popular; and in this respect he was on a par with Paley with twenty times his discursiveness and subtlety."

Before giving the final passage I have marked for quotation it is worth while to call attention to a trenchant criticism of Priestley in which Hazlitt had indulged at a time almost mid-way betwixt his sojourn at Hackney (1793-1795) and the final estimate contributed to *The Atlas* in 1829. Early in 1812, he was giving a course of lectures on " The Rise and Progress of Modern Philosophy." One of these lectures was entitled " Liberty and Necessity "; therein he refers to Priestley's " Illustrations of Philosophical Necessity," and expresses himself thus:—

" All Dr. Priestley's arguments on this subject are mere hackneyed commonplaces. He had in reality no opinions of his own; and truth, I conceive, never takes very deep root in those minds on which it is merely engrafted. He uniformly adopted the vantage ground of every question, and borrowed those arguments which he found most easy to be wielded, and of most service

in that kind of busy intellectual warfare to which he was habituated. He was an able controversialist, not a philosophical reasoner."

That is the most widely read of Hazlitt's opinions of Priestley if only because the *Atlas* essay is known only to those who have access to the none too easily available thirteen volume edition of the Collected Works. The passage which we shall now quote from the later essay is far from being wholly incompatible with the earlier estimate which was but a passing reference with no pretension of doing justice to whatever may have been the merits of him whom it so severely trounced. It will be evident that Hazlitt never lost his early respect—touched with admiration, shall we say—for the writings of Dr. Priestley. Here is his final word:—

"A man may write fluently on a number of topics with the same pen, and that pen a very blunt one; but this was not Dr. Priestley's case; the studies to which he devoted himself with so much success and *éclat* required different and almost incompatible faculties. What for instance can be more distinct or more rarely combined than metaphysical refinement and a talent for experimental philosophy? The one picks up the grains, the other spins the threads of thought. Yet Dr. Priestley was certainly the best controversialist of his day, and one of the best in the language; and his chemical experiments (so curious a variety in a dissenting Minister's pursuits) laid the foundation and often nearly completed the super-structure of most of the modern discoveries in that science. This is candidly and gratefully acknowledged by the French chemists, however the *odium theologicum* may slur over the obligation in this country, or certain fashionable lecturers may avoid the repetition of startling names. Priestley's controversy with Dr. Price is a masterpiece not only of ingenuity, vigor, and logical clearness, but of verbal dexterity and artful evasion of difficulties, if any one need a model of this kind. His antagonist stood no chance with him in the dazzling fence of argument, and yet Dr. Price was no mean man. . . . We do not place the subject of this notice in the first class of metaphysical reasoners either for originality or candour: but in boldness of enquiry, quickness, and elasticity of mind, and ease in making himself understood, he had no superior. He had wit too, though this was a resource to which he resorted only in extreme cases."

From the few surviving letters which were written by Hazlitt whilst at the College we may gain some information as to the studies which occupied his attention. It would appear that at least nine hours of the day had their duly allotted studies (including attendance

at lectures) and that another hour and a half, from 9-30 p.m. to 11 p.m. were utilized for general reading or work preparatory to the next day's lectures. Work began at 7 a.m. excepting for the three or four winter months when the students did not rise until that hour.

Hazlitt's father had already given him something more than the elements of a good classical education and the drilling therein was continued at Hackney, but the allocation of time for Greek was considerably greater than that for Latin and it may be noted that whilst, at daily morning and evening prayers, the senior students had to read the Old Testament Lesson in English from the Hebrew text, the juniors took it in turn to read the New Testament Lesson from the Greek text.

In the essay *On Pedantry* there is a passage which can hardly have been written without a fleeting thought of these exercises of early youth and, perhaps, also of the pulpit exhortations of his own father.

> "It may be considered as a sign of the decay of piety and learning in modern times that our divines no longer introduce texts of the original Scriptures into their sermons. The very sound of the original Greek or Hebrew would impress the hearer with a more lively faith in the sacred writers than any translation, however, literal or correct."[1]

Certainly, Hazlitt had, as his writings show, a fair degree of familiarity with the works of writers both Latin and Greek; that he continued to read them in the original tongue is more than may be said, and is perhaps unlikely, but there is evidence enough that he did not in his youth lack the opportunities for becoming a competent classical scholar.

The Hackney College curriculum included mathematics, geography, and history. Instruction was given in shorthand, also, and we may wonder how much of it had been retained when Hazlitt became a reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*.

Exactly how far he gave attention to the Hebrew Grammar, to Old and New Testament studies, and to doctrinal theology, we cannot know, but his subsequent facility in Biblical quotation and

[1] *Collected Works*, Vol. i, p. 82.

the readiness with which he engaged in theological polemics show his interest in these matters.

Problems in metaphysics appear to have been his primary preoccupation both before and during the Hackney College period nor did they terminate with it. During this period, however, there were other influences at work on the future essayist than those arising directly from the course of his studies and from those with whom he was immediately associated.

HAZLITT entered Hackney College at a time when everything conspired to draw the attention of students away from the fine-spun dialectics of systematic theology or the history of Christian doctrine. The controversies of an earlier time, even the oft-times acrimonious theological controversies of the day, paled into insignificance when compared with the stirring events that were being daily enacted.

Gilbert Wakefield, who, as we have seen,[1] was one of the college tutors from July, 1790, to June, 1791, in enumerating the disadvantages of the College's close proximity to London, considered the most serious to be " the perpetual interruption of the students by the calls of friends and relations, some of whom are constantly coming up to the metropolis; and this circumstance occasions a very serious loss of time indeed, both in the *immediate consumption* of it, and in that dissipation of ideas and unsettlement of the mind, which extends *beyond* the period of immediate interruptions, and frequently *begins*, from expectation, long before it: an evil this, which is also attendant on very particular transactions, occasionally agitating in the metropolis; such for instance, is the trial of *Mr. Hastings;* for an event of this kind may not occur again through life, and it would be thought harsh to deny occasionally such a gratification to the student."[2]

Very shortly after Hazlitt's arrival at Hackney judgment was

[1] *Supra* pp. 13, 14.

[2] *Memoirs* of Gilbert Wakefield, 1792 edit., pp. 370, 371.

given in the Court of King's Bench in a case which was calculated to arouse the interest of the whole body of rational dissenters. The trial of Warren Hastings was of general public interest, that of William Winterbotham [1] made its special appeal to those who were warm advocates of civil and religious liberty. Amongst these latter the young Hazlitt was already to be counted. On November 27th, Winterbotham, a Baptist minister of Plymouth, was sentenced to two years' imprisonment and a fine of £100 for each of two sermons alleged to contain sentiments both scandalous and seditious. During the term of his imprisonment two of his most constant friends were the Rev. Theophilus Lindsey of the Essex Street Unitarian Chapel, a close friend and supporter of the College, and one of the members of his chapel, a Mrs. Rayner, who being possessed of ample means made Winterbotham an annual allowance of £50 whilst he was in prison, and gave him "a considerable present on his liberation." It is evident that Lindsey, also, and others of the Unitarian dissenters, gave financial assistance to Winterbotham, for on December 6th, 1795, Priestley writes to Lindsey and expresses the hope that his (Priestley's) annual subscription of two guineas to Winterbotham has been paid.[2]

Winterbotham's sentence came at a time when the fate of other victims of the government's repressive measures still hung in the balance.

Just prior to Hazlitt's entrance to Hackney College, Thomas Muir, a leader of the Scottish Reformers, had been sentenced to transportation for fourteen years. Muir was an able and a sincere man who allowed his zeal to carry him into indiscretions at a time when feelings ran high and even idle words were marked as being charged with significance far beyond their obvious import. He asked for trouble, unwittingly it may be, and he got it.

Rutt tells us how he paid Muir a parting visit in Newgate. "Over the fire-place of the apartment was the engraved portrait of Dr. Price, an appropriate *genius loci* wherever Thomas Muir had sojourned, whether in a prison or a palace."

[1] *Infra.* Footnote p. 31.

Muir was removed to the prison hulks at Woolwich to await transportation and was there joined by Thomas Fyshe Palmer and two others bound for Botany Bay. Palmer, who had been at Eton and at Queen's College, Cambridge, and had held a curacy at Leatherhead in Surrey, appeared, prior to his sentence to seven years' transportation, to be "destined to become the apostle of Unitarianism in Scotland." His trial for being concerned in the publication of a handbill demanding universal suffrage and short Parliaments was of peculiar interest to all allied with the Unitarian movement in England. Amongst those who visited him on the hulks were Dr. Priestley, the Rev. Theophilus Lindsey, Dr. Disney and Mr. Rutt, and "a subscription was raised for his benefit, and that of Mr. Muir, in which several other fellow-sufferers were allowed to participate." [1]

The legality of the sentence passed on Palmer was called in question and both his case and that of Muir came before the House of Commons on March 10th, 1794. "Pitt upheld the Scottish Court of Justiciary in what was perhaps the worst speech of his whole career. He defended even the careful selection of jury-men hostile to Muir on the curious plea that though they were declared loyalists, yet they might be impartial as jurymen. He further denied that there had been any miscarriage of justice, or that the sentence on the 'daring deliquents' needed revision. And these excuses for biassed and vindictive sentences were urged after Fox had uttered a noble and manly plea for justice, not for mercy. . . . Pitt's speech also proves him to have known of the irregularities that disgraced the trials. But he, a lawyer, condoned them and applauded the harsh sentences. In short, he acted as an alarmist, not as a dispenser of justice." [2]

The fate of Muir and Palmer was now irrevocably determined

[1] "I rejoice to hear so good an account of Messrs. Palmer and Muir, and hope their exile will serve for the furtherance of the gospel, and the cause of liberty. I hope that you or Mr. Johnson pay my subscription of five guineas annually to them, and two to Mr. Winterbotham." *Letter of Priestley to Lindsey. Rutt's Priestley*, vol. II., p. 325.

[2] *William Pitt and the Great War.* By J. Holland Rose, 1911, pp. 179, 180.

and they duly suffered transportation to Botany Bay; all that was possible to their sympathizers and friends was indignation and something approaching despair at the continued encroachments on those liberties over which they kept jealous guard though in vain.

We cannot know how far the young Hazlitt gave attention to these events of, for him, the outside world, but, in all probability we should err greatly were we to suppose that he in no way shared the feelings that characterized not only his tutors but, almost certainly, many of the students as well.

The next event to which we have to refer was one which must have impressed every one within the Hackney College with the nature of the times in which they were living. The removal of Priestley to the United States could not be without its significance to the young students who attended his lectures and were wont to give him a hearing as minister of the Gravel Pit Chapel, at Hackney.

In August of 1793, Priestley's sons had emigrated to the States, and, at the time, he believed that it would not be long before he followed them. A few weeks earlier he had written thus to one of his friends:—

> "All my sons are going to America, and if they get well settled, I shall probably follow them, but I do not wish to do it soon, as my situation here is very agreeable to me; but such is the increasing bigotry of the high church party in this country, so justly and so kindly, with respect to myself, lamented by you, and such are the difficulties that I fear this country will be involved in, that such persons as I am may be glad to get out of it, and happily there is a country that can afford us an asylum." [1]

In another letter of about the same date he says:—"I may be glad to remove even the next year, though I do not wish to go so soon." Early in 1794 he had resolved that it was expedient to emigrate without further delay and by the beginning of March his intentions had become known.

It was a former student of the college who helped Priestley to pack up his books and his scientific instruments. That student was Michael Maurice, the father of Frederick Denison Maurice whose biographer tells us that Michael, when he left the college,

[1] Rutt's *Priestley*, vol. II., p. 201.

was "heart, soul and spirit, an enthusiastic political Liberal," and that as late as the year 1823 he could write that "The taking of the Bastille is still one of the *Dies Fasti* in my calendar." [1] Maurice was, at the time of Priestley's departure, the afternoon preacher at the Hackney Gravel Pit Chapel.

It appears to be beyond doubt that any student at the Hackney College lived in an atmosphere of political radicalism and that some, if not all, of the students rejoiced therein; equally certain is it that their tutors however much they may have lamented the preoccupations of those whom they were striving to make worthy apostles of a rational Christianity, were by no means unsympathetic towards sentiments so near to, and perhaps influenced by, their own.

Prior to leaving England, Priestley published *Heads of Lectures on a Course of Experimental Philosophy, particularly including Chemistry: delivered at the New College in Hackney.*

The volume is dedicated to the College students who are addressed in words of which the following form the opening paragraph:—"You cannot but be apprized, that many persons entertain a prejudice against this College, on account of the republican, and, as they choose to call them, the licentious principles of government, which are supposed to be taught here." Another paragraph reads thus:—"That any of your tutors, or any of the friends of this institution, wish to promote reformation, in church or state, by any other means than those of reason and argument, is a *calumny*, utterly void of foundation or probability."

We cannot suppose that Priestley would have allowed himself, by penning and publishing these words, to foster and perpetuate prejudices and criticism so inimical to the welfare of the College unless the notoriety already gained was so wide-spread as to make further harm an impossibility.

Priestley embarked at Gravesend on the 7th April, 1794, and

[1] *Life of Frederick Denison Maurice.* By F. Maurice, 1884, vol. I., pp. 7,9.

"In politics, he was in close confidence with the leaders of the democratical party from 1791 to 1794, and was one of the ardent Reformers over whom the Tory government exercised an espionage which compelled them to hold their meetings in secret."—*Memoir of Rev. Michael Maurice,* C.R., 1855, p. 411.

England saw him no more. His lectures to the College students had come to an end and he had written to them his reply to the "affectionate address" which they had presented to him, and we may surmise that these young friends of civil and religious liberty did not miss one whit of the significance of his departure. Priestley's exile was an event to be pondered over and its meaning learnt aright and Hazlitt was there thinking about it all and perhaps linking it up with those events of some three years earlier which, for him, had their culmination in the letter to the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* wherein he himself had youthfully defended Priestley and poured scorn upon his adversaries.

No one event, however, could long claim the exclusive attention even of those most interested in it. Within a few weeks of Priestley's departure one who but three or four years earlier had been a divinity student in Hackney College was in dire peril of being added to the number of those who experienced the utmost severity of the sentences passed upon alleged sedition and disloyalty to the British constitution.

The Rev. Jeremiah Joyce having completed his course at the College, became, through the recommendation of Dr. Price, tutor to the sons of Earl Stanhope. His political views were such as to make it inadvisable for them to be too freely advertized.

He joined the Society for Constitutional Information and, also, the London Corresponding Society. On May 4th, 1794, he was arrested at Stanhope's house at Chevening, Kent, on the charge of "treasonable practices," and on May 19th was committed to the Tower on a charge of high treason.

Thomas Hardy, Horne Tooke, Thelwall, Holcroft, and others shared a similar fate. It was the culminating point in the conflict between political radicalism and the Pitt administration, and a great deal hung upon the result of the ensuing trials.

William Shepherd of Liverpool, also a former student of the College, at once came to London "to learn if anything could be done to assist Mr. Joyce, and, if possible, to obtain an interview with him." [1] The latter, though eventually granted, was for a

[1] *A Selection from the Early Letters of Rev. Wm. Shepherd, LL.D.*, 1855, pp. 52, 53.

time positively refused by the government. Unwilling to be frustrated quite, Shepherd went frequently to stand on the quay fronting the Tower so that Joyce, seeing him there, might be cheered by his presence and be assured of his continued esteem and regard. During this time Shepherd paid a visit to Hackney College and dined there. Who shall suppose it to be otherwise than that the students continued to be deeply stirred by the events of the day ?

It was nearing the end of October when the accused were all removed to Newgate in readiness for the trials during which the public interest grew to fever heat. When Hardy was found " not guilty " and acquitted, the crowds around the Old Bailey, in spite of a very heavy November rain, almost prevented access to the building, and the Horse Guards and the City Militia had to be summoned.[1]

When John Horne Tooke also was acquitted, the release of the others became almost inevitable, and that was what happened. " On the 1st December, 1794, a Jury being *pro forma* impanelled, Messrs. Joyce, Kidd, Bonney, and Holcroft were brought to the bar, acquitted and discharged. Mr. Joyce immediately returned to Chevening where he was received with open arms by Lord Stanhope, who, in celebration of the event, instituted a series of festivities at Chevening Park, which was concluded by a ball that was opened by his eldest daughter, Lady Hester, with Mr. Joyce as her partner."[2]

That the students at Hackney were uninterested in the fate of Joyce or unmoved by his acquittal is not to be believed, and we may well surmise that the young Hazlitt paid heed to these events. One of his biographers weakly suggests that he may have been unmoved thereby, but there are clear indications that he was far from being indifferent to the issue of these trials of 1794, or in any way oblivious to their significance.

A few years later he became acquainted with one of the accused—Thomas Holcroft, and in 1810 published Holcroft's memoirs together with a continuation thereof based on Holcroft's diary and other papers.

[1] *British Radicalism*, W. P. Hall, 1912, p. 233.
[2] *Letters of William Shepherd*, p. 60.

In the fourth chapter of this *Life of Thomas Holcroft*, Hazlitt indicates the effect of the trials on the way in which Holcroft was esteemed by the reforming party and by the supporters of the Pitt administration. He adds:—

"There was a third class of persons, inferior in numbers, as they necessarily would be, of whom Mr. Holcroft might perhaps be considered the head, namely, those, who being detached either by inclination or situation, from the violence of either party, admired him for the firmness and honesty of his behaviour, and for the bold but benevolent tendency of his principles. His principles, indeed, were of such a kind, that they could not but strike and win upon the admiration of young and ingenuous minds, of those whose hearts are warm, and their imaginations strong and active, and whose generous and aspiring impulses seem almost to demonstrate the efficacy of disinterested and enlightened motives over the human mind, till it is hardened, depressed, distorted from its original direction, and bowed down under the yoke of example and prejudice." [1]

Is it not altogether probable that Hazlitt was thinking of himself and his immediate associates when he wrote of those young and ingenuous minds—the warm-hearted ones with imaginations strong and active? Is he not living through those times once again when he writes thus:—

"That love of truth and virtue which seems to all times natural to liberal minded youth, was at this time carried to a pitch of enthusiasm, as well by the extraordinary events that had taken place, as by the romantic prospects of ideal excellence which were pictured in the writings of philosophers and poets. A new world was opening to the astonished sight. Scenes, lovely as hope can paint, dawned on the imagination; visions of unsullied bliss lulled the senses, and hid the darkness of surrounding objects, rising in bright succession and endless gradations, like the steps of that ladder which was once set up on earth, and whose top reached to heaven. Nothing was too mighty for this new begotten hope; and the path that led to human happiness seemed as plain—as the picture in Pilgrim's Progress leading to Paradise. Imagination was unable to keep pace with the gigantic strides of reason, and the strongest faith fell short of the supposed reality. This anticipation of what men were to become, could not but have an influence on what they were. The standard of morality was raised high: and this circumstance must excite an ardent emulation in the minds of many persons to set an example

[1] *Collected Works*, vol II., p. 155.

of true and disinterested virtue, unshackled by the prejudices or interests of those around them. The curb of prudence was taken off; nor was it thought that a zeal for what was right could be carried to an excess." [1]

This is surely an elaborated statement of what at an earlier time was veritably the writer's own experience; to that experience there may be a something added and we need not believe that the young student ever felt that either his thoughts or his feelings even bordered upon what became, subsequently, his own account thereof. Nevertheless, it was not Hazlitt's way to write, with self-detachment, of what were or had been the enthusiasms of others but with which he himself had had no sympathy, unless, indeed, it were to pour scorn upon them. Things indifferent did not occupy his thoughts; he wrote of that which, albeit temporarily, had meaning and significance for him, and, in increasing measure, it became his own past that absorbed him most of all. Whatever it may be about which he writes there may always be found intimations of that which formed a vital part of the writer's own life experience.

Probably, the young Hazlitt, intense as his reading may have been, was influenced most of all by the events of the day and the reactions to them in the minds of those with whom he was most nearly associated.

It was not before, but during and after, the year 1791 that any overt sympathy with the French Revolution became utterly intolerable to all who regarded themselves as custodians of ancient privilege. The Revolution and its alleged significance cut right across the field of English politics and the cleavage between Burke and Fox paved the way for a party re-alignment which was as artificial as it was effective for the purpose of Pitt and his adherents. The old Whig party was doomed and the opposition in the Commons soon consisted of Fox and some fifty supporters, whilst in the House of Lords there were, eventually, not more than six who were consistent in their opposition to war with France and in their advocacy of reform.

Most, if not all, of those with whom Hazlitt had to do, were ardent Foxites.

[1] *Collected Works*, vol. II., pp. 155, 156.

"Fox indeed foretold the success of the French in combating with foreign powers. But this was no more than what every friend of the liberty of France foresaw or foretold as well as he. All those on the same side of the question were inspired with the same sagacity on the subject." [1]

There is much in that which Hazlitt wrote in later years that might tempt one to suppose that during his early years he was much more wide awake to the issues of the times than was actually the case. Nothing is more difficult than to make an estimate of the extent to which his thought and his feelings were set in rapid movement by what was an unprecedented course of events. We shall bear in mind that when Hazlitt went to the Hackney College he was little more than fifteen years of age and left but shortly after his seventeenth birthday. At the beginning of that brief period the fall of the Bastille (July 14th, 1789) was already as a tale that had long been told, the supremacy of the middle class oligarchy over the course which the Revolution should take had come to a violent end, the allies had invaded France, the Jacobins had risen to power, government was directed by a Committee of Public Safety, Louis XVI. had been sentenced to death and sent to the scaffold, and England had entered into the war against France. All of which happened whilst Hazlitt was still at Wem; his father's comments thereon would be decisive enough, for "all those on the same side of the question were inspired with the same sagacity on the subject." The sending of a king to the scaffold would, in all probability, appear to the Rev. William Hazlitt as being, at the most, an unfortunate incident in a desperate and chequered struggle for liberty. We can readily imagine him saying what the son *did* say more than thirty years later.

"The condemnation of Louis XVI. stands on the same broad and firm foundation as that of Charles I. of England; and the object of both was, as I imagine, to remove the most dangerous enemy of the state, and also to set an example and establish a principle, that if kings presume on being placed above the law to violate their first duties to the people, there is a *justice above the law*, and that rears itself to an equal height with thrones." [2]

[1] *Collected Works*, vol. III., p. 343.

[2] *Life of Napoleon Buonaparte.* By William Hazlitt, ed. 1891, vol. I., p. 158.

Hazlitt was well nigh fifty years of age when he wrote those words but it is likely enough that he would have said just the same thing in 1793, and in saying it would only have been re-echoing the thought to which his own father had given utterance.

Concerning the war with France he said, in 1823, what, thirty years earlier, he had doubtless accepted as being true, never having seen any reason to modify an opinion which, at first, did little more than reflect his own responsiveness to the vehement thought of others.

"It will, I conceive, hereafter be considered as the greatest enormity in history, the stupidest and the most barefaced insult that ever was practised on the understandings or the rights of man, that we should interfere in this quarrel between liberty and slavery, take the wrong side, and endeavour to suppress the natural consequences of that very example of freedom we had set." [1]

Hazlitt moved from the comparative quiet of the parsonage at Wem and went to live at Hackney, in close proximity to London, where, more than anywhere else, the latest news was quickly matter for public comment and anything that could be distorted into the similitude of Jacobinism was held up to unmitigated execration. Howbeit, at no time did Hazlitt show any overwhelming desire that his convictions should coincide with those most acceptable to others and he had already learnt that to be with a minority, or even to be alone with one's thoughts, has a glory all its own.

"For my part, I set out in life with the French Revolution, and that event had considerable influence on my early feelings, as on those of others. Youth was then doubly such. It was the dawn of a new era, a new impulse had been given to men's minds, and the sun of Liberty rose upon the sun of Life in the same day, and both were proud to run their race together. Little did I dream, while my first hopes and wishes went hand in hand with those of the human race, that long before my eyes should close, that dawn would be overcast, and set once more in the night of despotism—'total eclipse!' Happy that I did not. I felt for years, and during the best part of my existence, *heart-whole* in that cause, and triumphed in the triumphs over the enemies of man! At that time, while the fairest aspirations of the human

[1] *Collected Works*, vol. XII., p. 287.

mind seemed about to be realized, ere the image of man was defaced and his breast mangled in scorn, philosophy took a higher, poetry could afford a deeper range.[1]

To such significance as may be attached to the foregoing quotation from the essay *On the feelings of immortality in youth* we may add that of a passage in the essay *On Mr. Wordsworth's Excursion*, in the *Round Table*.

"But though we cannot weave over again the airy unsubstantial dream which reason and experience have dispelled:—

> 'What though the radiance, which was once so bright,
> Be now for ever taken from our sight,
> Though nothing can bring back the hour
> Of glory in the grass, of splendour in the flower'

yet we will never cease nor be prevented from returning on the wings of imagination to that bright dream of our youth, that glad dawn of the daystar of liberty, that springtime of the world, in which the hopes and expectations of the human race seemed opening in the same gay career with our own; when France called her children to partake her equal blessings beneath her laughing skies: when the stranger was met in all her villages with dance and festive songs, in celebration of a new and golden era; and when, to the retired and contemplative student, the prospect of human happiness and glory were seen ascending, like the steps of Jacob's ladder, in bright and never-ending succession. The dawn of that day was suddenly overcast; that season of hope is past; it is fled with the other dreams of our youth, which we cannot recall, but has left behind it traces, which are not to be effaced by Birthday and Thanksgiving odes, or the chanting of Te Deums in all the churches of Christendom. To those hopes eternal regrets are due; to those who maliciously and wilfully blasted them in the fear that they might be accomplished, we feel no less what we owe—hatred and scorn as lasting."[2]

We need hardly wonder as to the identity of "the retired and contemplative student" here mentioned, nor may we reasonably doubt the reality of the hopes with which Hazlitt, in the prime of his life, believed himself to have been imbued in the days of his youth. Because of the French Revolution he dreamed dreams which otherwise would not have been his and had born in him convictions of an intensity such as would hardly have resulted from a

[1] *Collected Works*, vol. XII., pp. 157, 158. [2] *Ibid.* vol. I., pp. 119-120.

course of study alone. Only a few weeks after his arrival at Hackney College, news came of the execution of Marie Antoinette, and the Reign of Terror had commenced. And a considerably greater detestation of the Revolution established itself in the hearts and minds of the great majority of Englishmen. But there were some who would not have their minds deflected from what they conceived to be the real issues by any events however untoward they might be.

"The cant about the horrors of the French Revolution is mere cant—everybody knows it to be so; each party would have retaliated upon the other; it was a civil war, like that for a disputed succession; the general principle of the right or wrong of the change remained untouched. Neither would these horrors have taken place, except from Prussian manifestoes, and treachery within; there were none in the American, and have been none in the Spanish Revolution."[1]

These words taken form the *Plain Speaker* do but echo sentiments from the speeches of Charles James Fox, though we would not say there is an echo and nothing more. Fox, himself, was, in many respects, the mouth-piece of the small minority of which he was the inevitable leader.

There is no testimony whereby to establish it as a fact, but the assumption that Hazlitt, whilst still at Hackney, was an eager, and an approving reader of the Parliamentary utterances of Fox, does not seem to be out of accord with what we should most naturally expect to have been the case.

The following quotation is given not because we may suppose that in those early years, Hazlitt thus clearly visualized the scenes in France but because it is not so generally accessible as the bulk of his writings and because, in all probability, it is little more than an amplification of his first thoughts concerning the Terror of '93.

"The sun of Liberty was in eclipse, while the crested hydra of the Coalition glared round the horizon. The atmosphere was dark and sultry. There was a dead pause, a stillness in the air, except as the silence was broken by a shout like distant thunder or the wild chant of patriotic songs. There was a fear, as in the time of a plague; a fierceness as before and after a deadly strife. It was a civil war raging in the heart of a great city as in a field of battle,

[1] *Collected Works*, vol. VII., p. 51, 52.

and turning it into a charnel-house. The eye was sleepless, the brain heated. Sights of horror grew familiar to the mind, which had no other choice than that of being either the victim or the executioner. What at first was stern necessity or public duty, became a habit and a sport; and the arm, inured to slaughter, struck at random and spared neither friend or foe. The soul, harrowed by the most appalling spectacles, could not do without them, and 'nursed the dreadful appetite of death.' The habit of going to the place of execution resembled that of visiting the theatre. Legal murder was the order of the day, a holiday sight, till France became one scene of wild disorder, and the Revolution a stage of blood." [1]

The "Terror" lost nothing *in the telling*; if, at times report fell short of the reality, it was not occasionally in excess thereof. But what was a little bit the more or a little bit the less in such tales as these. There, away in France, the grim reality was being enacted, and Englishmen were seized by a revulsion of feeling and an insensate horror, some by a creeping fear too. Was it possible that the contagion of such an extremity of violence might cause it to spread elsewhere? Who could tell? At one time it might have been possible to regard the French Revolution as an excusable attempt to wipe out inequalities of dire moment for the people and as representing something not wholly remote from the sacred cause of the liberties of man. Now, all but a small minority could see no cause at all; it was obliterated or, if not obliterated, most unutterably damned by the excesses perpetrated in its name. Howbeit, there were some who would not have their minds deflected from a possible consummation which, though not assured and the road thereto a scene of carnage and of blood, might yet be a consummation of incalculable benefit to France and not without its significance for all the countries of the world.

Hazlitt, at Hackney College, would be no stranger to the minority point of view. Some three months after the execution of Louis XVI. the Rev. Theophilus Lindsey, in a letter to John Rowe,[2] revealed it as it was before tested and tried by the "Terror" itself.

"Everything seems afloat in France, and I fear a sea of bloodshed and misery to be waded through before they can come to any good settlement. I

[1] *Life of Napoleon*, vol. I., pp. 186, 187.

[2] The Rev. John Rowe, of Shrewsbury, a former Hackney College student.

trust that in the result Divine Providence will secure to them their liberties, of which many among them have shown themselves unworthy." [1]

Whatever of youthful hopes Hazlitt may have entertained were neither blasted nor destroyed: that was to happen many years later. When he was drawing near to the end of his life he wrote words which are worth quoting though it would be unreasonable to suppose that they do no more than reflect the thoughts which were his in 1794.

"A man may at first imbrue his hands in blood from a strong sense of necessity or from a sincere love of his country; but in process of time, the love of justice or his country will become the professed and ostensible motive, the original repugnance will wear off, and the love of shedding blood will be an appetite and a disease in his mind, so that he will shed blood for the sake of shedding it. The execution will outrun the warrant; and for one deed of dire necessity, there will be a score of acts of voluntary and systematic barbarity. . . . It is possible that the feelings of justice and mercy should survive a series of cruel and barbarous acts, sustained by the sacred sense of duty; but it is barely possible—or if in one case, not in many. The act will oftener soil the motive than the motive will purify the act." [2]

But there are other considerations which Hazlitt would not have us forget. Referring to the same ferocity and the same excesses, he says:—

"They were committed by men who had received a Bourbon education, and had for the most part imbibed their ideas of what was fair and honourable from the precepts of priests and the example of nobles. *Coup-Tete* with his axe and his beard, his hand and his heart, was ready made for his part, and sprung all-armed out of the filth and rottenness of the ancient *regime*, like Pallas out of the head of Jupiter. The license of the time indeed gave a greater scope to such characters, when in the fury of civil contest the hateful passions were most in request; but the former state of things had left no dearth of such materials and such characters to work with. It would be more a matter of wonder, and would lessen the value of the change, if a people suddenly emancipated from a long, ignoble, and dastardly servitude, all at once displayed the wisdom and manliness of character of a people regularly trained to the possession and to the use of freedom." [3]

In some sort the French Revolution, especially in its main episodes, and, perhaps more still, a particular interpretation thereof,

[1] *Letters of Theophilus Lindsey*, p. 89.
[2] *Life of Napoleon Bounaparte*, pp. 200, 201. [3] *Ibid*, p. 231.

remained indelibly in the back-ground of Hazlitt's thought; it gave point to his hatred of Legitimacy and his despair at the downfall of Napoleon. His reaction to it and all that ensued therefrom coloured the very texture of his mind, it increased the strenuousness and intensity of his political convictions, and effectually divided him from all but a small number of those who were, or were to be, his rivals for literary fame. The seeds of it all were in " the bright dream " of his youth and in his whole-heartedness to a cause which, to many, seemed but a curse.

It has been assumed that Hazlitt, during his time at Hackney College, came into personal contact with William Godwin. Probably they did not meet until some years later, and, if we may be guided by Hazlitt's final estimate of Godwin, the delay was no matter for deep regrets.

" The well-known author of the *Enquiry concerning Political Justice*, in conversation has not a word to throw at a dog; all the stores of his understanding or genius he reserves for his books, and he has need of them, otherwise there would be *hiatus in manuscriptis*. He says little, and that little were better left alone, being both dull and nonsensical; his talk is as flat as a pancake, there is no leaven in it, he has not dough enough to make a loaf and a cake; he has no idea of anything till he is wound up, like a clock not to speak, but to write, and then he seems like a person risen from sleep or from the dead." [1]

Andrew Kippis, an ardent supporter of Hackney College and for some years one of its tutors, had been, at an earlier date, one of Godwin's tutors when he (Godwin) was training for the dissenting ministry at Hoxton Academy. *Political Justice* was published in 1793, some months before Hazlitt went to Hackney. Priestley gave it as his opinion that the book contained " a great quantity of original thinking " and would be uncommonly useful.

That Hazlitt did not long delay to read it is evident; in his essay *A Project for a new theory of Civil and Criminal Legislation*, he tells us how he gave " the rough draft of this speculation " to his Hackney tutor, Corrie. He then proceeds to say how he began by trying to define what a *right* meant, and that soon after he read Godwin's *Enquiry* with great avidity, and hoped, from its title and its vast

[1] *Collected Works*, vol. VII., p. 198.

reputation, "to get entire satisfaction from it." He was, however, dissatisfied with Godwin's failure to distinguish between political and moral justice.

Before he had been at Hackney many weeks his father had expressed the wish that his son would give up working on an essay on the political state of man. Hazlitt's reply is characteristic:—

"My chief reason for wishing to continue my observations is, that, by having a particular system of politics I shall be better able to judge of the truth or falsehood of any prevarication which I hear, or read, and of the justice, or the contrary, of any political transactions. Moreover, by comparing my own system with those of others, and with particular facts, I shall have it in my power to correct and improve it continually. But I can have neither of these advantages unless I have some standard by which to judge of, and of which to judge by, any ideas, or proceedings, which I may meet with." [1]

We must not regard these words as the empty vapourings of a boy of sixteen; they are but one of the manifestations of the serious intent with which the young Hazlitt was imbued. "Besides," he adds, "so far is my studying this subject from making me gloomy and low-spirited, that I am never so perfectly easy as when I am, or have been studying it."

It would indeed appear that at this time Hazlitt was getting a set to his mind which was never to be radically altered; he was laying hold of what were to be, throughout his life, the fundamentals of his thought. If there is exaggeration, there is truth also, in his words to Northcote.

"I remember once saying to this gentleman, a great while ago, that I did not seem to have altered any of my ideas since I was sixteen years old. 'Why, then,' said he, 'you are no wiser now than you were then!' I might make the same confessions, and the same retort would apply still." [1]

As we have seen, Hazlitt was not wholly satisfied with Godwin's *Enquiry*, but that is a long way from being the whole story; the *Enquiry* might have its defects but, none the less, it had its merits also. Hazlitt recognized them and in his essay on William Godwin, having pointed out that at that later date he (Godwin) was to all

[1] *Lamb and Hazlitt*, p. 39.

intents and purposes dead and buried, made clear the influence that his writings had had ere they were discarded and forgotten.

"The author of *Political Justice* and of *Caleb Fleming* can never die; his name is an abstraction in letters; his works are standard in the history of intellect. . . . No work in our time gave such a blow to the philosophical mind of the country as the celebrated *Enquiry concerning Political Justice*. Tom Paine was considered for the time as a Tom Fool to him, Paley an old woman, Edmund Burke a flashy sophist. Truth, moral truth, it was supposed, had here taken up its abode; and these were the oracles of thought.

"'Throw aside your books of chemistry,' said Wordsworth to a young man in the Temple, 'and read Godwin on Necessity.' Sad necessity! Fatal reverse! Is truth then so variable? Is it one thing at twenty and another at forty? Is it at burning heat in 1793, and below zero in *1814*? Not so, in the name of manhood and common sense! Let us pause here a little. Mr. Godwin indulged in extreme opinions, and carried with him all the most sanguine and fearless understandings of the time. What then? Because those opinions were overcharged, were they therefore altogether groundless? Is the very God of our idolatry all of a sudden to become an abomination and an anathema? Could so many young men of talent, of education, and of principle have been hurried away by what had neither truth nor nature, not one particle of honest feeling nor the least show of reason in it?" [1]

And thus the essay proceeds; it makes mention of young gownsmen, those of the greatest expectation and promise, leaving the University, tearing asunder the shackles of the free-born spirit and the cobwebs of school-divinity, in order to sit at the feet of the new Gamaliel; so, also, of students at the Bar neglecting for a while the paths of preferment and the law as too narrow, tortuous, and unseemly to bear the pure and broad light of reason, whilst students in medicine dreamt only of the renovation of society and the march of mind.

"Oh! and is it all forgot? Is this sun of intellect blotted from the sky? Or has it suffered total eclipse? Or is it we who make the fancied gloom, by looking through the paltry, broken, stained fragments of our own interests and prejudices? Were we fools then, or are we dishonest now? Or was the impulse of the mind less likely to be true and sound when it arose from high thought and warm feeling, than afterwards, when it was warped and debased by the example, the vices, and the follies of the world?"

Whilst being on our guard against a too easy assumption that

[1] *Collected Works*, vol. IV., pp. 201, 202.

the statements in Hazlitt's essays are fragments of autobiography, we can hardly escape the conclusion that Hazlitt, whilst yet at Hackney, was profoundly influenced by Godwin. Indeed, it does not seem very difficult to suppose that for a time he was something very nearly approaching to a disciple of "the new Gamaliel." Nor would that have done violence to the high idealism of youth, for even at the later day he thus estimates the trend of Godwin's work.

"He places the human mind on an elevation, from which it commands a view of the whole line of moral consequences; and requires it to conform its acts to the larger and more enlightened conscience which it has thus acquired. He absolves man from the gross and narrow ties of sense, custom, authority, private and local attachment, in order that he may devote himself to the boundless pursuit of universal benevolence." [1]

Whatever may have been the extent of, or the nature of, Godwin's influence on the growing mind of Hazlitt, its tendency would undoubtedly be in the direction of lessening any conviction that he may have had as to the supreme usefulness of a life spent as a dissenting minister. Godwin, himself, having adhered to the theology of Calvin, had been confirmed in what were then the tenets of Unitarianism by the writings of Priestley, but in 1787 he had lost faith in revelation which he believed to be, if not utterly incredible, of infinitely less importance than education of the mind in the principles of pure reason.

Why did Hazlitt leave Hackney College?

Hitherto, Hazlitt's departure from Hackney College has seemed to have little further significance than would naturally be the case when the incident is regarded as being but the inevitable outcome of an alleged "early distaste" for the ministry. It has been possible for us to conceive of him as *one* recalcitrant student turning his back upon others who maintained themselves steadfast in the way, as one who sought a larger freedom than could be found amongst the circumscribed and narrow interests of a theological

[1] *Collected Works*, vol. IV., p. 202.

seminary which remained untouched and uninfluenced by the crucial problems of the day. Thus to think is to fall short both of accuracy and completeness of understanding. Some indications as to the way of a nearer approach to the truth have already been given, and others yet remain for our consideration.

Hazlitt, so it would appear, left the College in the summer of 1795. In a letter, dated February 19, 1796, Thomas Belsham wrote thus: —[1]

"No formal resolution has yet passed concerning the institution, but it is taken for granted that it will be suspended or dissolved at Midsummer. I, for one, am determined to relinquish my connexion with it; and if I do, I shall probably be no further concerned in the business of education. . . . When a number of young men live together in the same house, there will always be some irregular and even immoral. But this is not our only ground of complaint,—there is an unaccountable tendency in the young men, in this part of the world, to infidelity, and *the studious and virtuous part of our family have very generally given up Christianity.* This is an evil to which no remedy can be applied. Actions may be restrained, but thoughts must be left free."

Very soon the fate of the College was settled and correspondents to the *Gentleman's Magazine* got busy commenting thereon. The following letter was dated May 21, 1796.[2]

"What I and others (lxiii, 334, 409) predicted three years ago (lxiii, 412, 618) has now happened to the Dissenters: '*Babylon is fallen, is fallen*' HACKNEY COLLEGE, *a spacious building*, fitted up at an *immense expense* (lx. 793), is to be sold by auction, or private contract, before the expiration of next month, in one lot, and the house occupied by Dr. Rees in another. What will be the future application of the *substructio insana* time will show: but that the proud boasts of this party are come to an end already is pretty clear; 'He that sitteth in the Heavens hath laughed them to scorn, and *men* will have them in derision.' They spake too plain (lxi, 509, 622, 984: lxiii, 492), and their designs are covered with confusion. Either they have no funds, or they have no managers, or they have lost all the men of abilities capable of conducting the mighty Babel, which was to make them a name to Heaven. The crazy ——, the infuriate ——, the heavy ——, the obese ——, the pedantic ——, the pretended classic ——, are not, when united, equal to the grand incendiary [Priestley] now under sentence of self transportation. I

[1] *Memoirs of Rev. T. Belsham.* By J. Williams, 1833, p. 461. The italics are ours.

[2] Vol. LXVI., pp. 458, 459.

mean not to insult these self-deceivers; but it is fit this issue of their machinations should be recorded by the hand of Sylvanus Urban. Neither do thou fear them, son of man; for, know that no wisdom or council devised against the foundation and truth of the Gospel will prosper."

This letter is but the issue of the correspondent's unholy joy in the absolute failure of the College to maintain itself in the face of the many and varied difficulties wherewith it had to contend; there is no need to wonder what the writer would have said if he *had* meant to insult those at whom he points but does not name.

In the next issue of the *Magazine* [1] there was a long letter from "A late Student." It is not possible to quote the whole of it, but we may note a part of its contents for the writer was by no means one of those who was only too willing to malign dissenters, especially if they were avowed Unitarians; he is critical of some of the ways in which the affairs of the College were conducted, but, apparently not unsympathetic to its purpose and design. He lays great stress (too much, we think) on the critical effect of the appointment of Priestley as one of the College tutors and dates the gradual decline of the institution from that time. He states, also, that Priestley resigned because he was "irritated by the inattention and neglect of his pupils." The most significant passage in the letter is the following:—

"Men who differ in religious opinions, surely ought to frame seminaries for the education of their respective ministers; but, when such seminaries become the volcanoes of sedition, and nurseries of riot, they cannot, nor should not, long remain established."

Nothing less than a bitter enmity against the College could cause those words to have been written, if they were not to some extent true. Exactly how true they were of Hackney College we can never know.

The June issue of the *Magazine* had the following paragraph which appears, also, in the *Annual Register* for 1796.[2]

June 23rd. The new college at Hackney, with 18 acres of land, was this day knocked down at £5700, whether to a real or fictitious bidder we have not heard. The adjoining house, inhabited by Dr. Rees, as president of the college, was bought by him, or in his name, for £1050. The fate of this

[1] Vol. LXVI., p. 555. [2] *Gentleman's Magazine*, LXVI., p. 519.

building, on which the proprietors acknowledge immense sums have been expended in building, and for which more than twice the sum it now fetched had been refused, and the fate of the institution itself, affords a striking proof that the people of this country are not disposed to encourage the modern philosophers in their attempts to undermine the constitution. That seminary was instituted under the most favourable auspices. The most wealthy and respectable part of the dissenters were disposed to support the institution; but, that support having been withdrawn, the building is brought to the hammer. Whether it shall be converted into barracks, being not further from the east than those in Hyde-park from the western extremity of the capital, or into a country settlement of any capital public and more constitutional school in London, or serve as a supplement to Bedlam, already too crowded to receive more inhabitants, time must show.

If such of the general public as were interested in these matters did not believe in the perfidy—may we not say the seditious intent—of those associated with the Hackney College, it was not through any failure of the enemies of that institution in acclaiming it to be a fact. Probably it was a fact if one may attach to utterances issuing from the irresponsible enthusiasm of some of the students the same significance as if they were the considered words of men whose convictions had become settled and irrevocable. Certainly it was a fact if it is necessary, as it is not, to regard any words in advocacy of civil and religious liberty or any criticism of the Established Church as seditious and as implying sympathy with all that had happened in France during the course of the Revolution.

The fate of the institution itself is now clear; to give fair measure to each of a number of causes which brought about the event itself is quite impossible, for their separate contribution towards the ultimate disaster is quite incalculable.

We have already made brief reference to Thomas Belsham, Hazlitt's divinity tutor; further mention of him must now be made with our eyes open to discover whether it was likely that he would be able to give anything of real assistance to students who discovered difficulty in retaining a sufficiency of faith to justify them in becoming ministers of religion.

Hazlitt left the College in June, 1795. In the previous January, on the fourth day thereof, Belsham wrote in his diary:—

"If I had that unwavering testimony of conscience which would enable me to place entire confidence in God, I should feel perfectly easy and tranquil; but in proportion as dark suspicion and painful doubts harass and distress my mind, my trust in Divine Providence diminishes, and my prospects are overcast."

Those words were written some six months before Hazlitt finally renounced the ministry. Six months after his departure, on January 1st, 1796, Belsham reviewing the year just ended writes:—

"This year (1795) has been remarkable for the declaration which many have made of their unbelief in the Christian religion, and for desertions from the ministry. Among the latter are ——— ——— ———, some of whom have been educated at this institution. These events have raised a great outcry against Unitarianism, and against me in particular, as being either an unbeliever, or at least indifferent to the Christian religion."

This last reflection is too much for the good man and he hastens to add:—

"These reports do not stagger my faith, nor hurt my mind. God knows how little foundation they have in truth, and my own consciousness bears witness to the faithfulness with which I have laboured in the cause of genuine Christianity."

Doubtless Belsham's labours had been scrupulously performed; he was carried along by the momentum of the more complete faith of an earlier day. Now, it is limping along in the track of a disturbed and troubled mind, a matter-of-fact mind, a mind of a very prosaic order, a mind not given to overleap the barriers of ordered thought. He could never have been the apostle of a new faith; very judiciously could he weigh up the merits of the old ways and make his determination as to which of them was the most genuine, marshal the evidence for it and get from it what comfort he could. He was by nature a man of a deep piety but without the capacity to climb the mount of vision or to believe more than he could tell.[1] And he was Hazlitt's divinity tutor.

[1] He did his work by the sole agency of the understanding. He could accomplish little or nothing by means of the imagination, or of the affections. Dr. Channing's sermons were not to his taste; nor could he have had any such sympathy with the most splendid of Burke's orations, or the most pathetic and impassioned pleadings of Erskine, as with the logical eloquence of Fox.—*Monthly Repository*, 1830, New Series, vol. IV., p. 249.

The entry in his diary for February 1st, 1795, but a few months before Hazlitt left the College, is as follows:—

"I labour under a very strong habitual depression of spirits, in some degree no doubt constitutional, but occasioned by the gloomy prospects which still seem to lie before me. I am, it is true, minister to a congregation; but I do not feel as I used to do about it."

Were we engaged in writing a biography of Belsham these, for him, troubled years would receive our sympathetic consideration: we are, however, more intent on understanding his probable influence upon the divinity students placed under his care than in doing complete justice to him by viewing these years as but a short span in long years of faithful labours.

On November 23rd, 1796, he wrote to a friend who had renounced the profession of Christianity.

"I have known so many intelligent and virtuous men who have of late become unbelievers, that I am far from regarding the relinquishment of the Christian religion as necessarily impeaching either the understanding or the morals, and I am much hurt when I hear any insinuations of this kind thrown about by others. I am aware that abuse is not argument, and if Christianity cannot be supported by reason, it is not worth supporting by railing."

The limitations to Belsham's own faith are revealed in the following passage from the same letter.

"I am not one of those who think, that the evidences of the Christian religion are clear of all difficulty; but after mature deliberation I find them to be such as in all other cases would warrant a practical regard, and lay a foundation for cheerful hope. Beyond this I neither go nor wish to go. It is the state of mind to which I believe it was the design of Christianity to raise us, and which in this imperfect state appears to me most favourable to virtue and peace; being equally remote from dogmatism and scepticism, and combining practical principle with rational consolation."

This seems hardly enough to stir the ardour of youth; Hazlitt was only seventeen years of age when he left Hackney. With Belsham's aid he was supposed to find his way through the thorny paths of theological doctrine. His interest did not lie that way and we need hardly be surprized if his tutor was unequal to the task of leading him to any enthusiasm for the "evidences for genuine Christianity."

Not yet, however, have we considered how it was that Hazlitt ever embarked upon a preparation for the ministry or what were the precise considerations which led to his determination that it was utterly impossible for him to follow in his father's footsteps and become a minister of religion.

The accepted story is that from an early age he had a distaste for the life of a minister, that his father's wishes prevailed over his own disinclination till there came that day when no respect for the wishes of a father could count against his own feelings of repugnance to the profession for which he had never felt any liking.

We may hold it open to question whether Hazlitt had any very precise feelings about the matter when, in 1793, at the age of fifteen, he was registered as a divinity student at Hackney College; probably he did not know what he wanted to be and perhaps—especially if we may judge by subsequent years—had no desire to be rigidly fixed in any occupation whatever. There is nothing unusual about a boy who, in his fifteenth year, is entirely undetermined as to what he would like his future to be.

Hazlitt's father wanted him to go into the ministry. What other possibilities were open to the son of a somewhat obscure and poor dissenting minister? It seems likely enough that if Hazlitt had not gone to Hackney he must, sooner or later, have entered some office—mercantile or other—and have remained therein considerably longer than he remained at Hackney. A feeling of unfitness for and a distaste for the work of the ministry are powerful arguments for giving up the idea of doing that work; a hatred of office routine and a lack of interest in business cannot so readily be accounted justification for abandoning it and once more becoming dependent on parents of straitened means.

The following paragraph may be found in Dr. Priestley's *A Free Address to Protestant Dissenters.*

"So well known are the straits to which ministers and their families have often been reduced that few are now educated with a view to it, except young persons, who have a turn for learning, and whose parents are unable to make other provision for them." [1]

[1] 1st *Edit.*, 1769; *Collected Works*, vol. XXII., p. 280.

Other evidence leads us to suppose that this statement of Priestley is a too pessimistic estimate of the actual facts but it may well have some applicability to the case of the young William Hazlitt who had a turn for learning and parents with no resources for educating him for any other of the learned professions. At Hackney, as a student for the ministry on the College foundation, he would get board and tuition free and his education would thus be continued at little or no expense to his parents.

Even had the Rev. William Hazlitt cared but little whether his son followed in his own foot-steps there yet remained a good deal to be said for sending him to Hackney as a divinity student unless the boy appeared to be deeply and irrevocably set against it. As a matter of fact he desired very much that this son should become a minister to those who were known as "the rational dissenters," or otherwise the heterodox or Unitarian section of the old Presbyterian dissent.

There is a passage in the essay *On the Knowledge of Character* which probably gets as near to being a bit of authentic autobiography as aught that Hazlitt wrote.

"The son, for instance, is brought up to the Church, and nothing can exceed the pride and pleasure the father takes in him, while all goes on well in this favoured direction. His notions change, and he imbibes a taste for the Fine Arts. From this time there is an end of anything like the same unreserved communication between them. The young man may talk with enthusiasm of his Rembrandts, Correggios, and stuff. It is all *Hebrew* to the elder; and whatever satisfaction he may feel in the hearing of his son's progress, or good wishes for his success, he is never reconciled to the new pursuit, he still hankers after the first object that he had set his mind upon. [1]"

Reference is then made to the fact that his paternal grandfather had been a Calvinist and had never got the better of his disappointment when his son (the essayist's father) had become a Unitarian.

"The matter rests here, till the grandson, some years after, in the fashion of the day and 'infinite agitation of men's wits,' comes to doubt certain points in the creed in which he has been brought up, and the affair is all abroad again. Here are three generations made uncomfortable and in a manner set at variance, by a veering point of theology, and the officious meddling biblical

[1] *Collected Works*, Vol. VI., p. 312.

critics . . . Happy, much happier, are those tribes and people who are confined to the same *caste* and way of life from sire to son, where prejudices are transmitted like instincts, and where the same unvarying standard of opinion and refinement blends countless generations in its improgressive, everlasting mould."

Thus, Hazlitt's own account of the cause of his father's disappointment, of his own failure to continue as a student for the Unitarian ministry, is that his notions changed and he imbibed a taste for the Fine Arts, that he came to doubt certain points "in the creed in which he had been brought up." This seems much more likely than the story which represents him as sent to Hackney College in the position of an unwilling victim of his father's wishes, and there remaining till his boyish antipathy to the course on which he had been embarked grew to such proportions that it could no longer be disregarded. There appears to be little to be said for William Carew Hazlitt's oft repeated story of a persistence in trying to divert the young student's mind and character "from its unchangeable bias."

The father's feelings when his son renounced all thoughts of the ministry may be guessed from the letter which he received from Andrew Kippis but a few weeks after Hazlitt departed from Hackney.[1] Kippis wrote as follows:—

Dear Sir,

I should have written to you much sooner, but have met with various hindrances, and, particularly, have been upon a long tour to South Wales. Now I do sit down to write, what can I say to you? I can only say that I sincerely sympathize with you in your affliction. I deeply feel for your distress and disappointment, and wish that I could impart to you any sufficient thoughts or words of consolation. At any rate, you have the consciousness of your own integrity to support you. You have done everything in your power to make your son a wise and useful man, and may we not hope that he will be a wise and useful man in some other sphere of life? What the other sphere may be I cannot point out, nor is it probable that I can be of service to him in any line from that for which he was originally intended.

It grieved me that he could not have a ten pounds which I had procured for him; but the donations are appropriated, by will, to students for the ministry and designing to continue such.

[1] *Christian Reformer*, vol. V., pp. 763, 764.

I have received six pounds, being the last half-year's allowance from the Presbyterian Fund. If Mr. John Hazlitt had been at home, I should have paid it into his hands. You will give me your directions concerning it.

I am, dear Sir,

Your very affectionate friend and servant,

AND. KIPPIS.

Westminster, Aug. 14th, 1795.

From the time when the Hazlitt family returned to England after their unfortunate experience in the United States, the Rev. Andrew Kippis had, with conspicuous regularity, nominated the Rev. William Hazlitt for grants from the Presbyterian Fund and from Dr. Williams' Charity. Kippis died some few months after the foregoing letter was written and the Hazlitts could no longer count on his sympathetic interest. The allocations from Dr. Williams' Charity (they averaged about £5 per annum) ceased after October, 1797; those from the Presbyterian Fund were maintained, with almost unbroken regularity, till 1820, the year in which, at the advanced age of eighty-two, William Hazlitt, the father, gained release from all his earthly cares, and his body found its last resting place in the burial ground of the parish church at Crediton in Devonshire.

In 1796, the year following that in which the young Hazlitt left Hackney, William Tayleur of Shrewsbury died. Tayleur had been a very generous supporter of the Unitarian dissenters; he contributed generously to the scheme which eventuated in the opening of a Unitarian chapel in Essex Street, London, for the Rev. Theophilus Lindsey; he was one of Priestley's greatest benefactors, gave liberally to the funds of the Hackney College, and it is altogether probable that on many an occasion he gave help to the Rev. William Hazlitt for he cannot but have known of the scantiness of the resources of so near a neighbour.

As early as July, 1790, Hazlitt, writing to his mother from Liverpool, avows that he "was very glad to hear of Mr. Tayleur's present." In the published diaries of the Rev. Wm. Bentley of Salem, Mass., there is mention of another occasion on which Tayleur did not forget the needs of the little parsonage at Wem.

That the straitened circumstances which were partly alleviated by "Mr. Tayleur's present" continued to make their pressure felt is evident from the fact that a few months later an anxious father had written to Kippis about them. Before noting Kippis's reply we may well notice how the young William writes thereon to his mother.

"I am concerned," he says, to hear that you have so little money, but I hope that your portion is not in this world, you have trouble for a few days, but have joy for many. The RICH take their fill in a few years, are cut short in the midst of their career, and fall into ruin; never to rise again. But the good shall have joy for evermore. Be sure to tell me if I may sell my old Buckles."

It is evident that the mother had had to confess to her boy of twelve the extreme scantiness of their resources. He expresses his sympathy in the platitudes which the home life had made familiar to him, and immediately thinks of a possible way of doing something to solve the problem so far as his own immediate needs are concerned.

In his reply to the father's letter, Kippis says, under date December 30, 1790:—

"You say you hoped to hear from me the beginning of the summer as usual, but it is always at the end of the year that I have the opportunities of testifying my remembrance. I have now obtained for you two nominations, of five pounds each; the first at the Presbyterian Fund, and the second yesterday, at Dr. Williams' Trust. The receipt for the first you will send me as annexed; the receipt for the other, which is printed in a particular form, will not be ready till about a week hence, when I will send it you for signing. The two nominations, with four pounds stated allowance from the Fund, will make fourteen pounds, which I shall pay according to your direction.

I am truly concerned for your disadvantageous situation, but I have had no opportunity of recommending you to a better. All the vacancies go to young men.

What is it that you design or wish with regard to your younger son?" [1]

When we know that the congregation at Wem raised but £30 per annum for their minister we can recognize what the sum of fourteen pounds would mean to him and his household. It appears that the future career of the young William was already considered.

[1] *Christian Reformer*, Vol. V., p. 763.

His father never did secure a more advantageous situation and, as we have already seen, Kippis and Tayleur, the most likely sources from which help might be expected, were both dead within about twelve months of Hazlitt's return home with the plans for his becoming a minister finished with and best forgotten.

There is every reason for supposing that the son's health was at a low ebb. He had been reading too much and thinking too much. He had, so we may suppose, been worrying too. He was but seventeen years of age and found himself unable to do anything else but cut right across the path of his father's most cherished wish; he had no alternative plan for his own future, and, having been but little of a burden to the home during the two years at Hackney College, he was faced with the necessity of sharing in the family's meagre resources. He spent most of the next four years at home. We have no specific account of the father's income during these years but we cannot escape the conclusion that this indulgence of his son was not possible without some sacrifice on the part of the other members of the small family. It says much for his parents that Hazlitt could look on these ensuing years as the happiest of his life.

We may here note something of what Hazlitt probably owed to his early association with the Unitarian section of the old Presbyterian dissent and, also, what he himself thought about it. He recognized its limitations and wrote thereof; he was even more aware of that which appeared to him to be its justification and retained a high appreciation of the spirit which had dominated many of its adherents. That appreciation doubtless had its ups and downs; it may, at times, have been at a low ebb and have seemed a matter of small consequence. But it was never lost nor, if at all, seriously diminished. Independent testimony to the characteristics of the so-called "rational dissenters" is to be found in the *Early History of Charles James Fox:* Trevelyan, having referred to the spirit of liberty, says:—

"Nowhere did that spirit exhibit itself in such striking and varied aspects as among the members of that denomination (Unitarian) which looked up to Lardner as its patriarch, and which counted Price and Priestley as hardly the

most distinguished among its many ornaments. There was not another class of the community in which the average of intellect and attainments ranged so high as among those Presbyterians who during the last half century had been drawing ever nearer to the tenets, and more willingly answering to the name, of Unitarians. The ministers of that body were eminent in many departments of exact knowledge, and solidly but unpretentiously read in literature. They were masters of the clearest, and perhaps the most agreeable, English that has ever been written,—the English of the middle class in the generation before the French Revolution, which Johnson spoke always and wrote when he was old; which Arthur Young and Benjamin Franklin possessed in its perfection; and which, after it had deservedly made its fame, William Cobbett at length carried into burlesque. The Presbyterian leaders stood valiantly to the front whenever the general interests of Nonconformity were at stake. They exercised always and in all places a freedom denied to them by statutes which the magistrate did not venture to enforce. Alone of all sects, they refused to be trammelled by a verbal creed. They thought as they chose; they preached as they thought; and the plenitude of their liberty aroused the admiring envy of many parish clergymen, and not a few actual and expectant dignitaries of the English Church, who, thinking with them, were ill at ease within the rigid and narrow limits of the Establishment." [1]

So, in 1806, in the *Advice to a Patriot*, Hazlitt suggests that he is fitted to give such advice if, amongst other things, "the love of liberty instilled from our very cradle is any security for the hatred of oppression." [2] Elsewhere, he says, "In my time, that is, in the early part of it, the love of liberty (at least by all those whom I came near) was regarded as the dictate of commonsense and honesty." [3]

In the *Common Places* contributed to the *Literary Examiner*, during the latter part of the year 1823, he writes:—

"Liberty is the only true riches. Of all the rest we are at once the masters and the slaves. Do not I feel this from the least shadow of restraint, of obligation, of dependence? Why then do I complain? I have had nothing to do all my life but to think, and have enjoyed the objects of thought, the sense of truth and beauty, in perfect integrity of soul. No one has said to me, *Believe this, do that, say what we would have you*; no one has come between me and my free-will; I have breathed the very air of truth and independence. Compared with this unbiassed, uncontrolled possession of the universe of

[1] p. 406, edit. 1908. [2] *Collected Works*, vol. III., p. 1.
[3] *Ibid*, vol. VII., p. 372.

thought and nature, what I have wanted is light in the balance, and hardly claims the tribute of a sigh. Oh! Liberty, what a mistress art thou! Have I not enjoyed thee as a bride, and drank thy spirit as of a wine-cup, and will yet do so till my latest breath!" [1]

Thus did Hazlitt value his inheritance, the love of liberty instilled into him from his earliest days. Nor had he any doubts as to whence he had learnt the way thereof. When he was well nigh fifty years of age, and many a time before, he announced what seemed to him to be the truth about it.

"The old Dissenters, indeed, I look upon as the nursing fathers of our liberties; and their stern and sullen opposition to church dogmas and arbitrary sway is perhaps ill-exchanged for the prevailing fashionable laxity, lukewarmness, and scepticism, in relation both to our civil and ecclesiastical polity." [2]

Earlier testimony may be found in the essay *On Court Influence*, contributed to *The Yellow Dwarf*, January, 1818:—

"Our sciolists would persuade us that the different sects are hot-beds of sedition, because they are nurseries of public spirit, and independence, and sincerity of opinion in all other respects. They are so necessarily, and by the supposition. They are Dissenters from the Established Church: they submit voluntarily to certain privations, they incur a certain portion of obloquy and ill-will, for the sake of what they believe to be the truth; they are not time-servers on the face of the evidence, and that is sufficient to expose them to the instinctive hatred and ready ribaldry of those who think venality the first of virtues, and prostitution of principle the best sacrifice a man can make to the Graces or his Country. The Dissenter does not change his sentiments with the seasons: he does not suit his conscience to his convenience. This is enough to condemn him for a pestilent fellow. He will not give up his principles because they are unfashionable, therefore he is not to be trusted. He speaks his mind bluntly and honestly, therefore he is a secret disturber of the peace, a dark conspirator against the State. On the contrary, the different sects in this country are, or have been, the steadiest supporters of its liberties and laws: they are checks and barriers against the insidious or avowed encroachments of arbitrary power, as effectual and indispensable as any others in the Constitution: they are depositaries of a principle as sacred and somewhat rarer than a devotion to Court-influence—we mean the love of truth. It is hard for anyone to be an honest politician who is not born and bred a Dissenter. Nothing else can sufficiently inure and steel a man

[1] *Collected Works*, vol. XI., pp. 540, 541.
[2] *New Writings of William Hazlitt*, Secker, 1925, p. 47.

against the prevailing prejudices of the world, but that habit of mind which arises from non-conformity to its decisions in matters of religion. There is a natural alliance between the love of civil and religious liberty, as much as between Church and State. Protestantism was the first school of political liberty in Europe: Presbyterianism has been one great support of it in England. The sectary in religion is taught to appeal to his own bosom for the truth and sincerity of his opinions, and to arm himself with stern indifference to what others think of them. This will no doubt often produce a certain hardness of manner and cold repulsiveness of feeling in trifling matters, but it is the only sound discipline of truth, or inflexible honesty in politics as well as in religion. The same principle of independent inquiry and unbiassed conviction which make him reject all undue interference between his Maker and his conscience, will give a character of uprightness and disregard or personal consequences to his conduct and sentiments in what concerns the most important relations between man and man."[1]

"It is hard for anyone to be an honest politician who is not born and bred a Dissenter." Many would see in such a statement nothing but a bit of sheer prejudice: to-day there probably would be less of truth in it than once there was. Be that as it may, Hazlitt felt quite sure about it, these twenty odd years after there was any intimacy of connexion between himself and ecclesiastical Dissent. It is to be noticed that when his own son was thirteen years of age he sent him to school to the Rev. William Evans, of Tavistock, though how long he remained there is indeterminable.[2] For the period of nearly half a century, Mr. Evans, in addition to the duties of his scholastic occupations, regularly officiated as minister of the Unitarian congregation at Tavistock.

Hazlitt disavowed any pretensions to being a politician; he did, nevertheless, have a considerable amount to say concerning political issues, and he knew no other than to say precisely what he thought. He was no time-server in the face of what he believed to be the evidence. He incurred "a certain portion of obloquy and ill-will" and the portion was not small. And, beyond a doubt, he regarded himself as being exposed to "the instinctive hatred and ready ribaldry of those who think venality the first of virtues, and prostitution of principle the best sacrifice a man can make to the Graces

[1] *Collected Works*, vol. III., pp. 263, 264.
[2] *Christian Reformer*, vol. III (New Series), p. 631.

or his Country." Nor was he wrong in so thinking. The Dissenter, says he, "speaks his mind bluntly and honestly, therefore he is a secret disturber of the peace, a dark conspirator against the State." Hazlitt knew all about that assumption, but had continued undismayed thereby.

"I am no politician, and still less can I be said to be a party-man: but I have a hatred of tyranny, and a contempt for its tools; and this feeling I have expressed as often and as strongly as I could. I cannot sit quietly down under the claims of bare-faced power, and I have tried to expose the little arts of sophistry by which they are defended. I have no mind to have my person made a property of, nor my understanding made a dupe of. I deny that liberty and slavery are convertible terms, that right and wrong, truth and falsehood, plenty and famine, the comforts or wretchedness of a people are matters of perfect indifference. That is all I know of the matter; but on these points I am likely to remain incorrigible, in view of any arguments that I have seen used to the contrary." [1]

There is the spirit of the Dissenter, a spirit inured and steeled against the prevailing prejudices of the world. In the essay on *The Tendency of Sects* we note the following:—

"There is one quality common to all sectaries and that is, a principle of strong fidelity. They are the safest partisans and the steadiest friends. Indeed, they are almost the only people who have any idea of abstract attachment, either to a cause or to individuals, from a sense of duty, independently of prosperous or adverse circumstance, and in spite of opposition." [2]

Let us compare with that the last paragraph of the essay on Guy Faux, contributed to *The Examiner*, November, 1821.

"Mental courage is the only courage I pretend to. I dare venture an opinion where few else would, particularly if I think it right. I have retracted few of my positions. Whether this arises from obstinacy or strength, or indifference to the opinions of others, I know not. In little else I have the spirit of martyrdom; but I would give up anything sooner than an abstract proposition." [3]

We may hazard the guess that, in part, it resulted from the prevailing spirit of those with whom his youth was spent. But not from that alone. To Northcote, Hazlitt said:—"The only pretension of which I am tenacious, is that of being a metaphy-

[1] *Collected Works*, vol. III., p. 31. [2] *Ibid*, vol. I. p. 51.
[3] *Ibid*, vol. XI., p. 334.

sician," and alongside of that confession should be placed a note from the volume of *Characteristics*.

"The study of metaphysics has this advantage, at least: it promotes a certain integrity and uprightness of understanding, which is a cure for the spirit of lying. He who has devoted himself to the discovery of truth feels neither pride nor pleasure in the invention of falsehood, and cannot condescend to any such paltry expedient." [1]

The same conviction is expressed in the essay *On the Shyness of Scholars*.

"Tell me that a man is a metaphysician, and that at the same time he is given to shallow and sordid boasting, and I will not believe you. After striving to raise himself to an equality with truth and nature by patient investigation and refined distinctions (which few can make)—whether he succeed or fail, he cannot stoop to acquire a spurious reputation, or to advance himself or lessen others by paltry artifice and idle rhodomontade, which are in everyone's power who has never known the value or undergone the labour of discovering a single truth." [2]

In the essay *On Court Influence* there is an utterance which we must not, with too great an assurance, suppose to be the outcome of Hazlitt's thoughts about his own father. It may be that such thoughts both prompted and illustrated the theme; it is not impossible that they had but little to do with it. In any case, his father was not the only dissenting minister he had known; there were many others, and they included Joseph Fawcett and Joseph Priestley.

"A Dissenting minister is a character not so easily to be dispensed with, and whose place cannot well be supplied. . . . It is a pity that this character has worn itself out; that the pulse of thought and feeling has ceased almost to beat in the heart of a nation, who, if not remarkable for sincerity and plain downright well-meaning are remarkable for nothing. But we have known some such, in happier days, who had been brought up and lived from youth to age in the one constant belief in God and of His Christ, and who thought all other things but dross compared with the glory hereafter to be revealed. Their youthful hopes and vanity had been mortified in them, even in their boyish days, by the neglect and supercilious regard of the world; and they turned to look into their own minds for something else to build their hopes and confidence upon. They were true priests. They set up an image in their

[1] *Collected Works*, vol. II., p. 366. [2] *Ibid*, vol. XII., p. 74.

own minds—it was truth: they worshipped an idol there—it was justice. They looked on man as their brother, and only bowed the knee to the Highest. . . . Their sympathy was not with the oppressors, but the oppressed. They cherished in their thoughts—and wished to transmit to posterity—those rights and privileges for asserting which their ancestors had bled on scaffolds, or had pined in dungeons, or in foreign climes. Their creed, too, was 'Glory to God, peace on earth, goodwill to man.' This creed, since profaned and rendered vile, they kept fast through good report and evil report. This belief they had, that looks at something out of itself, fixed as the stars, deep as the firmament; that makes of its own heart an altar to truth, a place of worship for what is right, at which it does reverence with praise and prayer like a holy thing, apart and content; that feels that the greatest Being in the universe is always near it; and that all things work together for the good of His creatures, under His guiding hand. This covenant they kept, as the stars keep their courses; this principle they stuck by for want of knowing better, as it sticks by them to the last. It grows with their growth, it does not wither in their decay. It lives when the almond-tree flourishes, and is not bowed down with the tottering knees. It glimmers with the last feeble eyesight, smiles in the faded cheek like infancy, and lights a path before them to the grave!" [1]

In Hazlitt, at his best, there is something of austerity and an apprehension of the ultimate of human aspiration. They were not always in the ascendant, nor could they be. Sometimes they seem rather far away from him, but never utterly remote. He had his share of an earthly inheritance and it revealed itself in many ways; often his wisdom was not of the kind which is first pure, then peaceable, then gentle, and easy to be entreated, but always it is hard to detect in it any conscious hypocrisy at all.

He was not always at his best and there were times when he was at his very worst; there were things which he did not understand and hardly seemed to want to. As to all that, enough. Our appraisements are not infallible. Nor were Charles Lamb's, but there is one of them which probably got very near the truth. He said:—"I think William Hazlitt to be in his natural and healthy state one of the wisest and finest spirits breathing."

[1] *Ibid.*, vol III., pp. 265, 266.

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